

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**I'm feeling cheated today! No, not by the puny snowstorm that wasn't. I'm feeling cheated by whoever the liturgist was who decided to give us just this little snippet of the Book of Jonah, one of the most beloved of Bible stories.**

**The episode we're offered today tells us what happened after Jonah was spit out of the whale's mouth on to the shore of Nineveh. It tells how the king and the people of Nineveh repented from their sinful ways, causing God to repent of the evil he had threatened to do to them.**

**The liturgist left out the best parts of the story. How Jonah rebelled against God's command to go to Nineveh with his call to repentance because Jonah, a true Israelite hated the despised Assyrians, and felt them unworthy of God's mercy. How he stowed away on a ship, trying to flee God. How God sent a storm that nearly capsized the ship until the unbelieving crewmen discovered Jonah, recognized he was trying to flee his God, and threw him overboard. How Jonah was then swallowed whole by a large fish, which we always assumed was a whale (maybe because it makes a whale of a tale), and was then spit up on the shore of Nineveh, where he finally does as God commanded him to do.**

**What follows in the story of Jonah is even more fascinating. Jonah is angry that the hated Ninevites were saved. He was angry that God was merciful to people he despised. Jonah then goes off into the country to pout and God provides him a place of comfort—for a day—but then takes those comforts from him, leaving Jonah once again angry, as he tells it "angry enough to die".**

**The story ends with God explaining to Jonah that his mercy is universal, available to "thousands of persons who cannot distinguish their right hand from their left."**

**The Book of Jonah is a satire, a humorous exaggeration that God uses to show his people that we are not the final arbiters of how God should behave or act, in the world, or in our lives. Jonah got mad at God because he relented, he repented of the destruction he had threatened Nineveh, and got mad at God again for removing the tree that God had given him to comfort in the desert. In other words, Jonah got mad at God for changing his mind.**

**Which of us haven't, at times, had to change our minds or our words to others, either because of changing circumstances, or forced to do so for the sake of maintaining a meaningful, life-giving relationship? Spouses, parents and children, employers and employees, and God knows, politicians do it all the time.**

**In this story of Jonah God is saying don't try to put me into your little "God-box". In our relationship, I may change the way I approach you, or what I ask of you. Don't try to run from me as Jonah did. I will pursue you and again call you to do things my way.**

**Our Gospel text offers us another "call" episode. James and John, Simon and Andrew immediately leave their nets and their father to follow Jesus. They don't hesitate. Their response is instant and total. No delay because of prior commitments; no excuses because of family ties. Each instantly gives up his livelihood, his security.**

**For what? There's no plan of action except to follow Jesus. There are no dogmas to memorize, no institution to join, no philosophy to embrace. The Itinerant Preacher is simply proclaiming that God's Kingdom is at hand: That God is present and working effectively in everyone's life. One need only to "repent" to experience that presence. The outward sign that they've repented, or totally changed their value systems, is when they put people instead of fish at the center of their lives. In following Jesus, they will learn how to do that—all the way to the Cross on Calvary.**

**The first call of Jesus to all of us is to REPENT! Think about it. If you are not experiencing the Kingdom of God in your life right now, ask yourself if there is anything, an attitude, a behavior, a relationship, that is unhealthy in your life that you need to do something about. The Bible is clear: your soul is not big enough for God and sin. One or the other must go.**

**More than a few of us have the misconception that we can add Christ to our lives, but not subtract sin. It is a change in belief without a change in behavior. It's what Jesus referred to when he spoke about building your house on sand. It will not stand. It is an illusion. It can't be done. Again, there is not enough room in your soul for God and for sin.**

**Only after repentance, can we experience the presence of the Kingdom of God. We begin to see with the eyes of faith; hear with the ears of faith; and open our hearts to the presence of God in those around us.**

**Let me end with a true story told by a woman named Eleanor Sass. A parable, if you will, on the Kingdom of God.**

When she was a young girl, Eleanor was hospitalized for appendicitis. Her roommate was a girl named Molly, who was injured when a car hit the bicycle she was riding. Molly's legs were badly broken, and, though she had multiple surgeries, she faced the strong possibility that she would never walk again. Quite naturally, Molly became depressed. She became uncooperative and cried a great deal. She only seemed to perk up when the morning mail arrived. Most of her gifts were books, games, stuffed animals—all appropriate gifts for a bedridden child.

Then, one day, a different sort of gift arrived, this from an aunt who lived far away. When Molly tore open the package, she found a pair of shiny, black, patent-leather shoes. The nurses mumbled something about “people who don't use their heads”, but Molly didn't seem to hear them. She was too busy putting her hands in the shoes, and “walking” them up and down her blanket.

That day her attitude changed. She began cooperating with the doctors and nurses. Soon she began therapy. One day Eleanor heard that her friend had left the hospital, and she had walked out, wearing her shiny, black, patent-leather shoes.

What happened to Molly that allowed her to walk out of that hospital toward a new life? Those shiny, black, patent-leather shoes gave her hope. They became a source of strength and a change of attitude that affected her emotionally and even physically.

Repenting of our sins, that is, changing our value systems, has the same therapeutic effect on our lives that allows us to experience God's Kingdom in our lives here and now. Then, like James and John, Simon and Andrew, we can follow Jesus with reckless abandon, knowing as God told Jonah that His mercy is as available to us “as the other thousands who don't know their right hand from their left”.