

Children

**Object:** Fish stickers, erasers, or tiny toys (If you are a fisherman you might wear a favorite fishing hat.)

Good morning, boys and girls. How many of you children have ever been on a fishing trip? I've done that and it is really fun. Sometimes I let the fish go after I've caught them, 'cause it's the fun of the catch that I enjoy most. Although sometimes if I'm out camping I fry the fish and have a good meal.

There are lots of different kinds of fish one can catch. Can you name any that you have caught? (Responses -- Trout, bass, perch, and so forth.) Sounds like good fish stories to me!

Do you know that there are people who are paid to fish? They do it for a living. They go out in big boats, far out into the oceans, to catch tons of fish. What do we call people who fish for a living? (Response.)

Yes, that's right. We call them fishermen, just the same as those who do it for sport.

Do you know that Jesus was friends with some fishermen? Can anybody name one of them? (Responses -- Andrew, Peter, James, John.) They were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. One day when Jesus met them He said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Wasn't that a strange thing to say? What do you suppose He meant by that? (Response.)

He meant that God is seeking men and women to be his people in a special relationship, and that He was going to use people to help bring others into his kingdom.

Jesus has extended that invitation to us as well. He will use us to be fishers of men.

Do you know how we can do that? (Response.)

We tell others what Jesus means to us, and how He loves them and died to forgive their sins, and we win them into God's kingdom.

Wouldn't you like to be that kind of fisherman? Okay, here is a little fish symbol to remind you that you can be one of Jesus' fishermen. (Pass out fish symbols.)

Teens/Adults

**Object:** envelopes

**Teachers:** This project will help your students to recognize their real priorities in life, and to see the ways in which those might change with time. Start off with a discussion. Ask your students to list some of the things that are important in their lives. Why are these things important? Do they think that they should be so important? Should other things be more important? What? Why aren't they more important? Now ask each student to make a personal list of the things most important to her or him. Do not ask your students to share these lists, but pass out envelopes in which the children can seal them. Promise your students that no one else will ever see their lists, but that you will hold them for exactly one year. At the end of that year, return the envelopes to each student. This will give your students an opportunity to reflect on both current and past priorities, as well as the encouragement to consciously shape future ones.

**Parents:** Everyone in your family would profit from this exercise. You can put the envelopes wherever you normally keep your valuable papers, with strict instructions to everyone to leave them alone until next year.

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Most of you know at least part of the story of the prophet Jonah. It is one of the most colorful and memorable stories in the Hebrew Bible. Jonah, of course, was the man who got swallowed by a big fish.

The gospel and the first reading both focus in on being called. In view of the Gospel we have today, however, I wonder if the problem for all of us is that faith, even that worn on our sleeves, does not go nearly as deep as it should go, that what Jesus is talking about, what drew his initial followers, was something far more profound than our modern attitudes of faith. What Tebow does is a bit of a variation on what Catholics did years ago, when they would make a sign of the cross before shoot for a basket or getting up to bat. Faith is what makes my life better. Faith is God on my side.

Jesus, however, presents a faith that goes way beyond our own conveniences and benefits. Notice how Mark frames it: Jesus sees the arrest of John the Baptist, and then begins his ministry. Jesus' whole ministry lies under the shadow of persecution and death. Jesus knows what the stakes are. But, given this perspective, what do we see Jesus inviting people to do? He invites them to conversion. We too are invited to conversion and action. Just as we celebrated Martin Luther King Day, we were not to take a day off but offer a day of service.

God came to a man named Jonah and told him to go to Nineveh, a wicked city, and "cry against it." But Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. It would not be wrong to say that Jonah hated the people of Nineveh. Jonah felt about the Ninevites like some people do about, say, Muslims or illegal immigrants. Bible scholar William Neil, in the *Harper's Bible Commentary*, (p. 294) describes Jonah as "a man who is the embodiment of intolerance, bigotry and lack of human sympathy."

Do you know anyone like Jonah? Is there any of Jonah in you?

Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh, so he went in the opposite direction. He boarded a ship bound for Tarshish, which was as far from Nineveh as you could go in the ancient world. His idea was that, as the Scripture puts it, he would escape "the presence of the Lord." What a bright idea. He would go somewhere where God was not.

What Jonah did not understand was that Jehovah is a universal God from whom there is no escape. It's like some people who act in a certain way when they are in church but act entirely different when they are in the office as if God could see them in church, but not in the workplace. It's also like that verse, Numbers 32:23, that says "your sin will find

you out.” We think our misdeeds are hidden, that we are safe. We couldn’t be more mistaken.

There is a story that comes from the days of the great British sailing ships. The British warship Sparrow suspected another vessel, the Nancy, of carrying illegal contraband. And so the Sparrow stopped the Nancy off the coast of Haiti. An examination of the Nancy’s papers and cargo yielded only circumstantial evidence of wrongdoing. Still this was enough for the captain of the Sparrow to seize the ship and to tow it into Kingston, Jamaica. There the captain and crew were charged with transporting illegal cargo.

Meanwhile, a British frigate, The Abergavenny, happened to be cruising in the same waters. The officer in charge of this ship noticed a school of sharks feeding on the carcass of a young bull. The officer ordered his ship to pull up alongside the dead animal. The sailors succeeded in hooking one of the sharks.

Hauling the shark aboard, they opened it up and discovered in its stomach a bundle of papers. Examination showed that these papers belonged to the seized ship, the Nancy. The captain set sail for Kingston. His boat arrived in port not long after the case of the Nancy came up for trial. Thomas

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“Be sure your sin will find you out.” You can’t hide from God and you can’t hide anything from God.

You have heard sermons before from the book of Jonah on the futility of running from God. Yet we all do it at some time in our lives. We don’t have to board a ship and head for a distant port. We do it with our minds and hearts. We simply tune out. We ignore the voice that calls us to God’s service.

There is no place that God isn’t, but Jonah still tried to flee, just as we do. But what happened? The ship that he was on encountered a vicious storm, and was tossed about on the waves like a toy. The wind and the waves were so fierce that seasoned sailors begged to their gods for mercy. Finally these sailors cast lots in order to determine with whom the gods were angry. The lot, of course, fell upon Jonah. “What is it that you have done,” the sailors asked him, “that this evil has come upon us?” Jonah confessed that he had displeased his God by seeking to flee from His presence.

“What shall we do with you?” the sailors asked, for the storm was growing ever more fierce.

“Throw me overboard,” Jonah declared, “then the sea will calm down.” The sailors were in no mood to quibble, so they threw him over the side of the ship into the raging sea. And the Bible tells us that the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of that fish for three days and three nights.

I believe it was Dwight L. Moody who said that it was perfectly easy for a great fish to swallow Jonah whole. After all, said Moody, Jonah is only one of the minor prophets.

I do have to tell you that there is another story of more recent vintage of a man being swallowed by a fish. His name was James Bartley, another British seaman who was whale hunting on the ship Star Of the East in February 1891. Bartley fell overboard and was swallowed, like Jonah, by a whale. Allegedly Bartley lived in the whale’s stomach for 2 days. He survived, but we’re told his skin was bleached white from the experience. He lived to tell his tale until 1926. (3)

We have no record that Jonah was beached white by his experience. But it is interesting to note that Jesus once referred to the story of Jonah. He told the skeptics that the only sign that they would receive would be the sign of Jonah. Christ would emerge from the ground on the third day after his crucifixion just as Jonah had emerged on the third day from the belly of the fish.

Now we all know the story up to this point. The big fish can no longer stomach Jonah after three days and coughs him up on dry land alive and well, and probably well chastened.

At this point the Lord came to Jonah a second time and told him again to go

preach to Nineveh. This time Jonah was in no mood to argue. So he went to Nineveh and preached “Forty days,” he cried, “and the Lord will destroy this city. Forty days is all you have to repent.” And something amazing occurred. “The people of Nineveh believed God.” They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth all of them, from the greatest to the least. Even the king of Nineveh repented. He dressed in sackcloth and issued a decree of total surrender to the will of God.

That’s impressive. Anytime you can get a politician to repent, you’ve accomplished something. Jonah’s revival was an astounding success. Every sinner had repented. Every heart was changed. You would think that a preacher would rejoice in such a great victory being given to him. But not Jonah.

Here are three of the most fascinating sentences in all the Bible:

“But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger & abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity”

Can you believe that? Jonah was upset that God had changed his mind about destroying Nineveh he literally wanted to die.

Then Jonah went out on a hill overlooking the city to see what would happen to Nineveh to see if God would acknowledge his displeasure. And God had a little fun with His cantankerous prophet. He made a plant grow up near Jonah to shade him while he sat and pouted. And the plant pleased Jonah immensely. It's one thing to have a temper tantrum. It's another thing to sit all day in the hot sun. If he was going to sit there until he died, at least he would do it in comfort. But when dawn came the next morning, the Lord sent a worm to attack the plant so that it withered and died. Then God sent a hot east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so hard that he fainted. The weather made Jonah so uncomfortable and so angry that he again asked God to let him die. But then God spoke to Jonah. He asked him if he was angry over the plant dying. Jonah answered that of course he was.

And then God taught Jonah a lesson. In two of the most important verses in the Bible, God said to Jonah, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people

who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" And this is how the little book of Jonah ends.

What a magnificent story. The lessons, of course, should be obvious. The first one we've already noted. There's no place you can flee from God's presence. That's the first lesson. There's nowhere that God is not, if I might be allowed a double negative. God is a universal God.

And here is the second lesson: God's love is a universal love.. In fact, you can make a case that God loves diversity. God created a rainbow of different people and that's the way he prefers it!

I was reading recently about bananas. You may wonder what this has to do with diversity. After all, aren't all bananas the same color at least when they are ripe? Well, yes, but this may be the problem.

Did you know that bananas may be on the way out. They may soon go the way of the dodo and the dinosaur. One report suggests that, if we are not on our guard, bananas may disappear in less than ten years.

Here's the problem. The vast majority of banana trees, regardless of location, are virtual carbon copies of one another. The modern banana lacks genetic diversity. Therefore, any parasite or disease that strikes one banana tree has the potential to wipe out the world's entire supply. The fruit is threatened by its uniformity.

Writer Mark Tabb makes this comment: “The banana crisis shouldn’t surprise us. Uniformity always makes a species weaker. The more alike plants or people may be, the more at risk they actually are. This is especially true of the human race. Most of us feel threatened by those who aren’t like us. Whether the pigmentation in their skin is different or their ideas run counter to our own or their outlook on life is just plain strange, diversity makes us uncomfortable. Variety may be the spice of life, but most people prefer their life bland. Those strange people with their strange ways of doing things perplex us. And worse.” (4)

And yet God created diversity. There is a reason. Different people have different gifts. Especially in an economy such as ours, we need a steady influx of people with energy, ambition and different ways of thinking. It may irritate us that the clerk in the store barely speaks English, but diversity has been

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And Jonah stalked to his shaded seat and waited for God to come around to his way of thinking.” “And God is still waiting for a host of Jonahs to come around to [God’s] way of loving.”

But God’s grace is sufficient for all. This is the truth of the New Testament: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We are all dependent on God’s grace.

I think that it is absolutely ironic that the best-known hymn of Christendom, at least English-speaking Christendom, was written by a former slave trader. Don’t tell me God doesn’t have a sense of irony! Who is more demonic than a slave trader? Taking innocent human beings from one part of the world, snatching them from their families, stuffing them down into the cargo holds of ships, chained, many of them dying en route, then selling them into bondage in a distant land. Yet Christ touched John Newton’s heart and subsequently Newton wrote, “Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

We don’t know if the scales ever fell off Jonah’s eyes like they fell off John Newton’s eyes. The Bible doesn’t tell us. He did learn that he could not flee from God’s presence. And he learned that God loves everybody: Jews and Gentiles, Iraqis and Russians, the people of Nineveh and the people of Israel. We all belong to one great family, and Christ died for everyone’s sins. I hope that, as Jonah thought about his past attitudes, he came to realize that God’s grace was sufficient for him as well.

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## II

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III Father Joseph Pellegrino

Today's reading point us to consider God's call and the exigency, the necessary immediacy of our response. They begin with the journey of Jonah through Nineveh. According to the reading, Nineveh was a very large city. It would take three days to walk from one end to the other. But the Ninevites didn't need to hear Jonah's prophecy for three days. After a single days walk, or as soon as they heard it, they repented. In the Gospel, Jesus call Simon and Andrew, and then James and John, and they leave their boats and follow him immediately. The strongest message of demanding an immediate response, though, flows from the second reading from Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*:

*I tell you, brothers and sisters, the time is running out.  
From now on, let those having wives act as not having them,  
those weeping as not weeping,  
those rejoicing as not rejoicing,  
those buying as not owning,  
those using the world as not using it fully.  
For the world in its present form is passing away.*

It is very clear that we must make the best use of the time that the Lord gives us. This is a stunning contrast to the attitude of so many who set aside an hour a week for the Lord feeling that somehow or other they have kept God happy in a mere 60 minutes. God does not need our prayers for an hour a week. We do not pray to keep God happy. We pray to keep ourselves happy, and we pray for others to be happy. We need to pray, and we need to pray continually.

We have to make the best use of our time. Our time is not our own. It belongs to God. At the beginning of the *Book of Genesis*, we hear that all creation was entrusted to mankind. When we think of creation, we focus on the concrete aspects of creation, those things which we can see such as the lakes and oceans, the mountains and hills, and we focus on the plants and animals God has given us to care for,, and we focus on human beings and how we can care for others through the proper use of God's gifts of creation. There is another aspect of creation we often miss. That is time. Time is also part of creation. Time only exists in the physical world. It is entrusted to us to be used wisely.

We have to set aside time for many different activities--for sleeping, for working, for exercising and, especially, for praying. In fact, we should all have a schedule for prayer in our daily lives, a schedule that we keep. It is important also that we set aside time for relaxing. Some of us live in a state of continual stress. We need to fight off stress usually through physical activity. Either we take care of stress or stress takes care of us--and everyone around us. We have to set aside time for others, sometimes that means caring for others, but usually we simply need to be with others.

Sadly, we often waste time. We get tied up in going from one You-Tube video to another, or from one TV program to another. After a while, we look at our watches and

ask, "Where did the time go?" My great fear is that God looks at me and says, "Is that the best you can do with your day?" We have a responsibility to use whatever time we have left well.

Many older people often ask, "Why am I still here?" The answer is that God has more work for us to do, more ways to use the time he gave us. The last week of August, 1988, I came to St. Ignatius to say goodbye to my mentor, Fr. John LaTondress. He was dying of cancer. He said to me, "This is not fun, you know." He wanted it to end, but he knew that God still had a bit more work for him to do here on earth, even if that work was simply to offer up his suffering for another week or so.

Fr. John received the blessing of knowing that his time on earth was coming to a rapid conclusion. We do not all have that blessing. Most of us do not know when our days on earth are coming to an end. We can live another 50 years, or just another 50 days. That is why we have to live our lives in a way that we are always ready to give an account for how well we use the time the Lord has given us.

To all this we have to add that when the Lord gives us a particular call, a particular mission, He calls us to address this Grace immediately. There is an exigency to His call. When we put off responding to this grace, then the unheeded call can very well dissipate and an opportunity to further the Kingdom of God will be lost. How often have others asked us a serious question at an inconvenient time. Children and Teens seem to be excellent at finding the worst times to ask a question or make a statement that needs an immediate response. Just as Mom is parking at the supermarket, her 9 year old says, "Billy's parents are separating. Are you and Dad going to do that too?" Mom might want to put off the answer and the discussion but then the right time to respond never comes. How often I have said, "This person is seriously ill. I must see him; I must see her," but then I put my visit off only to learn that it is no longer possible for me to visit.

*The earth is the Lord's and its fullness thereof*, we pray in Psalm 24. This world belongs to God. He has set us in this world to do his work, but He only gives us a brief time to accomplish His tasks. We pray today that we make the best use of the time He gives us.