

[BLANK] For those who participated in our holy conferencing last week, thank you! I hope that you had a good time being a church that was just a little bit outside the box! We started in our sanctuary, and then, after the passing of the peace, [HOLY CONF] we had special worship and holy conferencing activities in the fellowship hall. We served Holy Communion like the disciples of Jesus fed the thousands by the Sea of Galilee. I hope and pray that you had an opportunity to feel the possibility of greater things for your faith, and this church, beginning to grow in your heart, even if we didn't do it all perfectly.

You see, being a disciple of Jesus isn't about being perfect. [SCHOOLBUS] We'll get messy sometimes, and we'll make mistakes, just like Miss Frizzle used to do in "The Magic Schoolbus," the TV science show for kids. [BLANK] But, being a disciple of Jesus IS about seeking excellence, trying to find the next right thing that our God wants us to do, with the perfect love that God has given us in Jesus. There will be times when we have to move past our mistakes and our own ideas of perfection, to follow the call that God has given us, finding new courage to get up and move forward in faith towards the excellence that God has prepared to be our way of life. Will you pray with me, please. [PRAYER]

I know that many of us and our families face major challenges, and, sometimes, setbacks. Life is not for sissies, as some folks say. It does take courage to live our lives in times that challenge our health, our finances, our relationships, our very sense of who we are, just like they challenged the fishermen along the Sea of Galilee, who dropped their fishing nets to become the first disciples of Jesus. This is why building up a community based on faith in Jesus Christ is so important. When we invest in faith as a community, we pool together our abilities to grow God's excellence together, so that we can help us, our community, and the world, to feel the healing and transforming touch of God in our lives.

[PENNIES] One of our holy conferencing activities was to decide how we would each spend an extra hour a week in our faith life. We divided our time between the three simple rules of Methodism: Doing no wrong, doing good, and staying in love with God. We each took a roll of pennies, and we all "spent" our extra hour together, by dividing our pennies among three bowls, one for each of our three simple rules. I noticed that everyone did their spending a little bit differently. One person even spent their whole roll of pennies on just one of our rules! And that's fine, because, at the finish, all three of the bowls had pretty much the same number of pennies. You see, if we all work together on our faith, we can share a well-balanced approach to our faith. Together, we can grow in God's excellence, and share it. [BLANK]

But finding that excellence doesn't happen instantly. It takes a commitment to move towards being who God wants us to be. When we look at today's reading from the Hebrew Bible book of Jonah, we can be tempted to think that God delivers instant results. Jonah 3 says that God told Jonah to get up, go to the biggest and most wicked city around, and tell everyone to repent of their sins, so that they could avoid destruction.

And, just like that, everyone in Nineveh listened to Jonah, everyone repented, and so God forgave them, and saved them from destruction.

Simple, right? Not. The real story is that Jonah was told by God to do this exact same thing before, and instead of following God's instructions, Jonah jumped in the first boat out of town, to get as far away as he could from Nineveh! Calling Nineveh to repentance? Jonah must have thought, "That's excellence way beyond my pay grade, God, you've got the wrong person for this job!"

But of course, God had just the right person to call sinners to repentance. God called a sinner just like you and me, an everyday person, someone who got a whiff of God's calling for them, and headed for the exits! Sometimes our faith gives us more than we bargain for. We may say, "Please tell me what to do, Lord!" and when God responds to us, sometimes we can be challenged by what God asks us to do, and walk straight away from what we know will be our salvation, and the world's salvation. We jump on the first boat we can, and head for a place where we can deny ever having heard God's call.

Denial didn't work for Jonah. He got on that boat, and before you know it, the boat was rocking, back and forth, in a violent storm. The crew and the passengers knew that God was trying to convince someone on the boat that they were a sinner. Down below the decks, Jonah hid, while the boat rocked, back and forth, back and forth. as the dim cabin lamp swung back and forth, back and forth. Jonah hid from his sins. He pretended that life would go on like normal somewhere else, a geographic cure for a spiritual problem that he could not escape. He wouldn't admit to being the sinner God wanted to convince, until they drew lots, and the lot fell to Jonah. Willingly, Jonah was thrown into the sea, to save the boat - and to ask God for mercy.

[JONAH] We know this part of the story well: Jonah was swallowed by a whale. People really have been swallowed by whales, by the way, hoping for salvation, listening to the whale's heartbeat next to their heartbeat, like a baby in a mother's womb. After three days in the belly of a whale, Jonah finally asked God for forgiveness. God forgave Jonah, and the whale spat out Jonah on a beach near Nineveh. [BLANK] Covered in whale goo, flat on his back, Jonah finally was ready to serve God with excellence, because he owed his life to the God of salvation. And so, when all of Nineveh heard Jonah calling them to repentance, they believed him. They heard a man who got up from the low point of his life to accept God's call to excellence, and they believed him. People heard the power of God's forgiveness in Jonah's words, how God's excellence had changed Job, a repentant sinner, and they believed.

There comes a time when we become sick and tired of being sick and tired, and we actually start to do what God has asked us to do, because it's what God has meant us to be - courageous, humble, simple people who won't stand for anything less than fearless service to God's kingdom on earth - the fullness of God's excellence. We may not see all of it in our lifetime, or in a thousand lifetimes. But until we start to get up, and follow God's call to faith together, we may as well be in the belly of a whale, waiting to

become fish bait. We can be more in faith. We know it. And God knows it.

[MALALA] In 1997, Malala Yousafzai was born in a small village in Pakistan. Malala loved school, and she was a good student. Then, one day, Taliban soldiers took over her village. The Taliban did not want girls to go to school. Some news reporters from England helped Malala to tell her story. Under a cover name, she told the world how she and other girls were being mistreated by the Taliban. Eventually her story put pressure on her government to push the Taliban out of her village, and she was able to go back to school. The Taliban found out that it was Malala who had written about them. One day, Taliban soldiers boarded her school bus, and shot her in the face.

Malala survived her injuries. She could have run away from the world, like Jonah, and avoided God's call to excellence. But instead, she got up, and followed a call from God to keep telling her story of hope, and peace, and justice, to the whole world, for the sake of all children. In 2014, Malala received the Nobel Prize for peace. She knew that she could be more, And she knew that God knew that she could be more. And so, she was.

Malala is not perfect. And in many ways, Malala is not exceptional. She is just a simple person, from a simple town, like us. But Malala is excellent, in a way that only people who get up and follow a call to grace from God can be excellent. [BLANK] You don't have to be perfect to serve God with excellence. You don't have to know the Bible perfectly, pray perfectly, do mission work perfectly, sing perfectly, be a parent perfectly, or do anything perfectly. Some of us may get to God's perfection for some fleeting moment, through God's perfect grace. But all of us can become more excellent servants of the perfect God who loves us so very much, a miracle that comes to life when we reach out and surround ourselves with all of the disciplines of faith, and the people of faith who we need.

Just as with those pennies in the bowls, we will need to rely on others to help us to find God's complete excellence on earth. But all of us can decide to get up, see the truth of what God has called us to, and follow Jesus together, surrounding ourselves with the people who will lead us to God's salvation on earth. We can be more. We know it. And God knows it. Stop running away from God's call. Drop your nets that catch nothing but despair. Build a family of faith that will bring us and everyone closer to God's excellence than we had ever imagined. Get up, and go, wherever God is calling us, together. Get up, and become who God has called us to be in Christ. Amen.