

“Opt in for Growth”
By. Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy
Isaiah 65.17-25
Jonah 1
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When I first started in ministry I was told that the synod I was in required new ministers to join part of a group that included other recently ordained ministers. It would be a three-year commitment that we had to attend, with gatherings at least twice a year. Part of me felt excited about this opportunity, but another part of me felt nervous and maybe anxious. My personality is such that if I am told I have to do something, I am automatically suspicious of it. I need really good reasoning to buy in, and ideally even like to have some ideas or energy invest in it.

Almost a year into ministry they gathered us together for the first time. This is relevant, because I really could have used this group in that first year, but probably didn't recognize it as such. I came into the group thinking, “New pastors? We've been ordained a year - they already missed so much!” Come to find out, my colleagues were equally suspicious. At the first evaluation we all raised the question about why it took so long to gather us together! We cautiously continued to gather every six months, and we were reminded that we got out of the group whatever we put in. If we didn't show up, we didn't benefit from the friendships and conversation. If we participated, those relationships would grow.

My first couple years of ministry included a deadly tornado ripping through the community that I was serving in. This community had been affected by a tornado in the 1970s, so for those who had no damage, it was re-triggering for them. But there were many who lost their homes, their family members, their belongings.

I was not at all prepared for this in seminary. There is no class on natural disasters or compassion fatigue or how to handle this sort of tragedy. I felt completely alone. I wanted to jump in and help, but I found that rather than helping, I spent more time absorbing the anxiety and sadness of the community, creating my own compassion fatigue. I became burnt out worrying, wishing I could do more.

The new pastor's group was a space that I could unpack my own feelings about being in the tornado, to recognize that I could be present for people and not take on their own sorrows, but to walk with them in a healthy and helpful way. This group supported me in ways I could not have imagined.

We continued to support each other - through the birth of children, adoptions, loss of children, divorces, congregation changes, call changes, loss of homes, and celebrations of new relationships. We keep gathering all these years later, sometimes to share resources, mostly to find rest and have good conversation and support one another.

I, perhaps begrudgingly at first, opted into this group, which led to growth within myself, and among our relationships. It is a growth that is important but immeasurable. What I do know,

and say over and over, is that this group saved me in ministry, and I probably would not have continued if it had not been for this group.

Each week we are exploring our stewardship theme of opting in. We began last week by opting in to service in the church and in community. Today we are opting in to growth. This can look like a few different things, just as opting in to service did.

Often when we think of growth we think of numbers - physical people, something tangible that we can assess and put as a statistic somewhere. Some ministry is measurable, some is not. We cannot measure the spiritual growth we have. There is no gauge or measuring stick that tells us how deep our faith is or how much we have grown in our relationship with God. We cannot measure our impact on the community. We do not know how a seed we planted or a comment said in love might stick with someone for years, impacting them and changing them for good.

Opting in to grow, emotionally, physically, spiritually, or socially, is good - but it isn't always easy. We read about Jonah today and we only hear part of his story. God is calling Jonah to go to a town of Nineveh and preach a difficult word. Jonah has to give them a word of warning, telling the Ninevites that they must change their ways. Some personality types have no problems delivering difficult news - but Jonah does not have that personality. He does not want this job and runs away from God. We read about his trip out to sea, where God troubles the waters and sends waves and a storm, and Jonah ends up in the ocean, and ultimately in the belly of a fish. All of this because he didn't want to deliver some bad news.

Eventually, Jonah listens to God and goes and tells the people they have forty days to shape up, or God will destroy them. Now, the people believed what God said, and repented and changed! This is amazing! This is what God wanted! Jonah, however, is furious! He expected the people to continue to rebel and in a strange way wanted to see Nineveh suffer.

What we do not read is how furious Jonah is, and that he goes to sulk up on a hill. He builds himself a booth and sits to mope. God offers a plant for shade, which makes Jonah happy, but then God sends a worm to destroy the plant, which also infuriates Jonah.

This is a narrative that addresses repentance, spiritual growth, and prophecy. The place of Nineveh existed but the story and Jonah most likely did not. There are different kinds of growth shown in this passage. Jonah is called to opt into prophecy, which he avoids at first, and then follows through. He calls the Ninevites to opt in for growth, repenting of their sins and changing their ways.

The Ninevites do just that, and make a change. What we perhaps do not expect is that Jonah does not recognize this growth, nor does he opt in for growth himself. He isolates himself, and sort of pouts on his hill. He could have spent this time opting in for his own personal growth, but pushed out the community and God. When God destroys the tree, the point made is that Jonah was more wrapped up in his own welfare, in his own loss of shade, than of the tree.¹ Rather than learning from the experience, he decided to sit and stew. The Ninevites opted in for

¹ Ehud Ben Zvi, "Jonah" in *The Jewish Study Bible*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1203.

growth. He opted to isolate. Sometimes we resist the learning, maybe because we're tired, or it is too much energy, or not in the direction we thought. Yet, when we opt into learning and growth, we can find amazing things. We can find amazing connections, and be strengthened in ways we couldn't imagine.

The Isaiah passage reminds us of the possibilities through God. God creates out of chaos. God delights in creating something we cannot even imagine. When we run out of hope, this is what we are promised - that God is working in the dust, in the dim light, where no one can see.

I pray that you can see the possibilities here in this church, and in the community. If you cannot see those possibilities, I pray that you can trust in God and that God is working where we cannot see. May we opt in, because God is creating a beautiful growth even though we cannot fully perceive it. Amen.