

January 25 – Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)
Joanne Miya, Maryknoll lay missionary, Tanzania

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Along with her family, Joanne Miya serves with the Maryknoll in Tanzania. Her reflection, published here, is also found in A Maryknoll Liturgical Year: Reflections on the Readings for Year B, available from Orbis Books.

At the heart of a mission vocation is the answer to a call. The call today is not that much different from the call that Jonah, or Simon, or Andrew heard. It is a call to “come follow me.” As with any commitment, we usually think we know what it will entail, but time often proves us wrong. “Calls” are revealed one day at a time. Oh, how some of us wish that our response, “Yes, Lord,” would be followed by a clear plan with guidelines, maps, and a budget, straight from God. But the response is not just about the task being required of us; it is also about our own transformation. Through Jonah, God spared Nineveh and in the process Jonah learned humility. In today’s Psalm we read that the Lord “teaches the humble his way.” When Simon, Andrew, James and John dropped their fishing nets to follow Jesus, I doubt that they had a clue about all that would be asked of them. The recruitment technique Jesus seemed to have picked up from his Father was based solely on trust.

When I first arrived in Tanzania as a Maryknoll lay missionary, AIDS was a new disease thought to be limited to gay men and intravenous drug users. Surely it would not have much of an impact on Africa. I never envisioned myself working with AIDS patients. That was not my “call.” How wrong I was! Little by little people began showing symptoms resembling AIDS. The pandemic was beginning. Now, many years later, there isn’t a family that hasn’t been affected in some way by this disease, and I’m now the director of a program that serves people living with HIV and AIDS.

In Africa, learning that you are HIV positive is devastating. Many people hide their HIV status from their spouses or family because they fear that they will be rejected. Women fear that their husbands will abandon them, or at the very least, beat them. Many men refuse to get tested, unable to face the possibility that they are infected. Others blame witchcraft or evil spirits. All are afraid. One thing they know for sure is that once you test positive, life will never be the same again.

Mary Fabian is one of our volunteers. Eleven years ago Mary began showing symptoms shortly after the death of her third child. Her husband refused to allow her to seek medical help. It was then that Mary’s life made a turn-around. She left her husband and began to pray in earnest that she would know God’s plan for her life. Through pray and spiritual direction, Mary realized that God was calling her to serve others.

She began getting proper medical care and her health was soon manageable. Mary wasted no time in offering to visit other people living with HIV and AIDS and to share her story. She is committed to living celibately, which she says is only possible through prayer. Through her participation in her Basic Christian Community, the Women’s Guild, and numerous other parish groups, Mary has become well known for her compassion, gentle spirit and complete trust in God.

Mary takes life one day at a time and simply puts “God first.” While her health has its ups and downs, her trust in God is unwavering. People who are trying to live positively with HIV and AIDS understand

Paul's letter to the Corinthians. They know that what they previously worried about, wept about, or rejoiced in, can and will all pass away. Mary lives each day knowing that time is short, but it is not the number of her days that matters; rather it is how she lives each day.

More than 300 people are registered at our program. All have dealt with the stigma associated with being HIV positive. They have been discriminated against, abused, rejected and abandoned. Yet they have all chosen to get back up and find a new direction for their lives. They have found support among others who, like them, are HIV positive. They encourage each other, and they refuse to be limited by their disease. Many, like Mary Fabian, have chosen to be open and share their stories with others. Because of their commitment and their bravery to speak out, the stigma is lessening. It is interesting that our most outspoken clients are also those with the deepest faith. It is not by their own strength that they are able to do what they do. Soon enough, their own transformation leads to the transformation of others. Divisions cease.

In the gospel, Jesus announces, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." No one knows what the future holds or how much longer we have on this earth. God will most certainly bring all plans for us and our world to completion. In the meantime, are we fulfilling our call to share the compassion of Jesus with those who are in need?

Whatever our vocation may be, humbly trusting in God, one day at a time, God can and will change our lives and the lives of those around us in ways we could have never imagined. If we started each day with Psalm 25:4 "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths," who knows where God's paths might lead? One thing is for sure; our lives would never be the same again.

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