

Called to Deep Relationship

I heard a report this week about fin whales, the second-largest mammal in the world.¹ Fin whale songs are one of the loudest sounds in the ocean — comparable to engines on large ships. Scientists trying to map the Pacific Ocean floor had been treating the songs of the fin whale as extraneous noise, thinking that they muddy up data gathered at the bottom of the ocean. But new research found the loud chirps that the whales make have a similar effect to the instruments used to peer into the ocean floor.

Seismologists use the information about the Earth's crustal layers in the oil and gas industry as well as in geology and climatology. This work requires a signal that travels beneath the ground, bounces off the Earth's layers and is recorded by a receiver. The source of the signal is usually something called an air gun. But the air guns are very expensive. And they create a lot of noise in the ocean that some think is harmful to the wildlife.

Fin whale calls are quieter with a more narrow frequency range compared to air guns. While the air guns penetrate deeper and produce a higher resolution picture than the whale sounds do, use of the fin whales helps scientists overcome the roadblocks of expense and harm to wildlife. This benefits the animals as well. Seismological tools help conservationists study the endangered fin whales through tracking and estimating population quantities.

Of course, for the whales the purpose of their songs isn't to map the ocean floor.² Fin whale chirps are only produced by male whales. The songs attract females from great distances to concentrations of food that the male has found, thus creating the potential for relationship for at least as long as it takes procreation to occur.

By now you might be wondering what in the world the fin whale has to do with the stories of a rainbow in the sky and the baptism of Jesus. I've been wondering that too ever since I heard the story. It seems to me there must be some connection between whales making deep noises being used by scientists to map the ocean floor and our Lenten theme of "Deep Calls to Deep." How can this story not connect with this week's theme of "Deep in the Sea: Called to Deep Relationship"? The most important relationships we have – with God, with creation, and with other people – are represented in this story. I invite you to join me on this journey of discovery.

Prayer: *We know you are present among us, God, calling us to deep relationship. With the floodwaters behind us and the waters of baptism holding us, help us to hear your voice and use our relationship with you to establish our identity with other people and the world we live in. Amen.*³

The theme "Deep Calls to Deep" resonates with me. Listen to what the creators of the Lent resources wrote about their work and their choice.⁴

Our writing team began our work the very week that everything began closing, canceling, and locking down around us because of the novel coronavirus that was about to become much more real to us. We had one embodied meeting, seeing the shape of each other's faces, shaking each other's hands, and then we entered the world of isolation and virtual connection with which all of us are now familiar.

Suddenly the wilderness of Lent was all too real, as we were stripped of our usual resources, surroundings, activities, and circles of relationship. As our world changed from week to week and even day to day, we didn't know what kind of reality we would be planning worship for in one year's time. In the months that followed, the world experienced both deep grief and invitations to a new spaciousness of time, as we needed to release so much of what usually fills our lives.

¹ [Whale Calls Amplify Efforts Of Deep-Sea Seismologists To Map The Ocean Floor | Here & Now \(wbur.org\)](https://www.wbur.org/news/2020/02/20/fin-whale-songs-ocean-floor)

² <https://dosits.org/galleries/audio-gallery/marine-mammals/baleen-whales/fin-whale/#:~:text=Recent%20research%20in%20the%20Gulf,that%20the%20male%20has%20found.>

³ Adapted from Lent 1 focus statement, Lent-Easter Worship Resources, *Leader*, Winter 2020-2021, ©2020 MennoMedia, p. 38.

⁴ Adapted from, *Leader*, p. 36.

Our team dove into the Scriptures for this season and found within them stories, songs, and promises that called us to identify what is essential, what really matters, who we are at our core, and what God asks (and doesn't ask) of us. In the Scriptures and the traditions of Lent, we saw a scrubbing away of the excess to get to the core of our Christian journeys and of ourselves. We knew that Lent 2021 could be a time of reopened grief but also a season for renewed questioning of what we have discovered to be the deepest and truest parts of our lives and our journeys with God.

The call to go deeper can be frightening or overwhelming when we feel we are not ready and do not know what we will find. We keep much of our pain in our depths. But the theme "Deep calls to deep"⁵ arose for us as we experienced God calling out from a deeper place than the areas we usually think we can plan and control. And God's call echoes in a deep place within us as well, a place where the words of love spoken to Jesus at his baptism dwell: "You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Live deeply into this throughout Lent.

For me, the image of a whale deep in the ocean calling out in deep tones to find connection with another whale fits well with what we'll be doing during the next six weeks. The notion of a scientist using those calls to make a map of the ocean floor where darkness abounds fits with this as well.

Similar to scientists using a variety of methods to capture and put to use the sounds of the whale in order to make sense of the ocean floor, so too we attempt to listen for God's voice through a variety of methods including scripture reading, worship, group study, and contemplation. We use what we hear, experience, and learn to identify who we are, what is essential, and what God asks of us.

Perhaps I could end the sermon here. This gives us plenty to think about. But I'll go ahead and spend a few more minutes exploring what it means to be called to deep relationship.⁶

The season of Lent opens with God's voice ringing out, first to all creation through Noah and then to all humanity through Jesus. God's message is "You belong to me, and I belong to you." This week's texts remind us that our identity is fundamentally rooted in the God who created us, loves us, and calls to us.

Noah's family and the remnants of animal life with them stand on the edge of a receding sea that had swallowed up the world. God's favor had spared them on the ark. But they were left with a deep sense of their vulnerability. God pierces those emotional depths with a covenant and a sign in the form of a bow in the sky. The rainbow serves to remind them and God that never again will God flood the earth in that way. It isn't a promise that anything they fear will never happen. But it is a sign that God has chosen them – God has covenanted with them – and will be with them forever.

According to my theological dictionary, a covenant is a "formal agreement or treaty between two parties that establishes a relationship and in which obligations and mutual responsibilities may be enacted."⁷ A covenant is one of the major ways of understanding how God interacts and maintains relationships with people. As followers of God, we use the biblical concept of covenant as a guide or pattern for how we maintain relationship with each other.

In the Old Testament, we read about four major covenants: (1) The covenant between God and all of creation found in Genesis 9 in which God promises to never again destroy the earth via a flood as a way of "solving" the problem of sin. (2) The covenant between God and the descendants of Abraham and Sarah found in Genesis 5 and 7. Here God promises that Abraham's descendants will be a great nation and a blessing to the earth. (3) The covenant between God and the nation of Israel found in Exodus 19-24. The promise here is "I will be your God and you will be my people." (4) The covenant between God and David's descendants found in 2 Samuel 7 promising that God would protect Jerusalem, and that one of David's descendants would forever reign over Israel.

Throughout the Old Testament we read stories of people who keep breaking the covenant God seeks to establish with them. They keep on "messing up." They keep on trying out other ways rather than God's ways.

⁵ Psalm 24:7

⁶ Some of what follows is adapted from, *Leader*, p. 39.

⁷ Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996. P. 64

But God perseveres. God makes promises. And God keeps promises, unconditionally. Each covenant expects human beings to be faithful to God. And humans always fail in some way to hold up their end of the deal. But God still keeps promises. Unconditionally.

In the New Testament, we find the ultimate story of God not giving up. Here we find the New Covenant between God and all people. God promises forgiveness of sin, eternal life, abundant life, guidance, and blessing among many other things. The sign of this covenant is baptism – both by water and by the spirit.

Just as Noah hears the voice of God after the flood, Jesus, too, hears God’s call as he rises from the waters of baptism. As he emerges from death to life, out of chaos into order, God establishes his identity, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” This relationship is the launchpad for Jesus’ ministry. He begins to announce the presence of the kingdom of God, calling people to believe the good news—that they are beloved children, chosen and pleasing to God.

These deep relationships – between God and creation, God and individual people, God and groups of people, God and Jesus, Jesus and the people he meets along the way – all of these relationships serve as guides or patterns for how we maintain the relationships that are part of our lives.

Think about the covenants, the commitments, the relationships that are part of your life. For many of you, what comes to mind first is your marriage covenant. I imagine the promises you made to your spouse included loving, comforting, honoring, protecting, sharing, and being faithful as long as you both shall live. I’m 100% sure that none of the marriages represented here have been without difficulty and some pain. We have all witnessed and some of us have experienced the extreme pain that comes when that deep relationship is broken, sometimes is beyond repair. We have also witnessed the deep commitment and love that have sustained marriages through joyful and difficult times.

Many of you have children. You may have presented your child at church for a parent-child dedication. During that time of covenant making, not only do the parents promise to nurture the child in faith, the congregation also promises to assist in that effort. Over the years, the parent-child relationship changes as parents age and children mature. As with all deep relationships, there can be great joy, immense love, and sharp pain.

Some of us have been baptized. Baptism is a symbol of belief in God, of renouncing sin, of accepting the Word of God as guide and authority for life, of willingness to give and receive counsel in the congregation, and of readiness to participate in the mission of the church. As Mennonites, we believe our relationship with God involves both individual and corporate components. We’re called not only to deep relationship with God, but also with each other as part of the body of Christ working together to share God’s love and build God’s kingdom here on earth.

As members of Salina Mennonite Church, we covenant to be a Christian community seeking to share God’s love through celebration, nurture, service, and peacemaking. When I was ordained as a minister, I promised to respect and be guided by the beliefs and practices of the Mennonite Church, to be faithful in the study of scripture, to be a faithful pastor, and to persevere in prayer.

Along with connections with the divine, with a spouse, with family, and with the church, friendships and solitude can also be a source of deep relationship. What are you doing to nurture those relationships? What could you do? What could we as a congregation do to help each other?

I began this sermon with a whale story. Something else that has stuck in my mind this week are words written by Sandra Montes-Martinez, WDC Associate Conference Minister based in Texas. Her essay titled “Love...My Neighbors?” appeared in this week’s WDC Sprouts, our conference newsletter.⁸ Here is what she wrote.

In our Anabaptist theology it is difficult to argue the “love” for others as we do ministry, since some of the most relevant emphases are the practices of peace and justice. We have a firm conviction to align ourselves

⁸ [WDC Sprouts, February 16, 2021 | Western District Conference \(mennowdc.org\)](https://www.mennowdc.org/sprouts/2021/02/16/)

with the weakest and to advocate for just causes, even when we do not comprehend the actual conflict. In our desire to understand and sympathize with the most marginalized, we read and educate ourselves about problems to responsibly advocate for the cause.

From my point of view, we often forget the basic principle of the teachings of Jesus "to love others like ourselves." How can we express sympathy or understand the suffering of others, if we really do not know the experiences of suffering injustice? Only when we relate to those who suffer do we understand what they are really experiencing.

Many of us may even feel "sympathy fatigue" for not being able to help or make the changes that we long for. In our outreach, I suggest that we put effort into our relationships. In my experience, it really makes us understand the circumstances of those who we want to advocate for or love as ourselves.

Jesus not only sympathized with people but also acted on their needs. He walked with the sick, the needy, and the helpless. Most of the time, we sympathize with a cause or need, but do not relate to those in need. This gives way to racial, ideological, and social disproportions. When we really want to make a difference, we do not only analyze and study the problem, but we also act to make changes.

I imagine what it would be like if our neighborhoods were more multi-ethnic, where I can understand how others think and act. Not because I have only read about it, but because I have the experienced relationships, not to take advantage or for marketing, but for an intentional experience. This is important when we talk about diversity in any aspect of life. Only when we know who we love can we honestly understand the ravages of our neighbor.

When Jesus said, "love one another" and "love your neighbor as yourself," he also gave us the mandate to really know each other and to embrace the lives of others as we seek their wellbeing.

One of my fears in this time of social distancing that we are living is the habit of avoiding the inconvenience of supporting each other, of being able to be present, while putting on the best cover photo and continuing in our world.

In my life as a generational immigrant, one of the important tasks we have had to learn is adapting to the new place where we live, to their meals and customs of life, and even the language spoken in the region. It is not easy to feel part of the people around us, but it is important to know and relate with the people impacted by our ministry or local congregations.

Jesus set out to meet the people he wanted to reach, ate with them, mourned for their dead, and healed their sick. All of this to show them the kingdom of God. Jesus was so close to his friends that some of them recognized him because he broke bread and ate with them, not because of his great speeches, but because of the ordinary, daily way of living.⁹

Jesus did not limit himself to giving the sermon on the mount but also lived the sermon on the mount, walking with the people, living where those he loved lived, embodying the love of God in his daily life.

I pray today that we can open our hearts to walk with others that may be different from us and love them and treat them with meaningful love as we follow Jesus.

I've been pondering Sandra's observation that this time of social distancing has led to a habit of avoiding being present with and supporting each other. At a time when we keep to ourselves to prevent the spread of a virus, we have lost some of the connections we've had with each other and with the wider community. Perhaps we've even lost some of the motivation to walk with others that may be different from us, loving them and serving them as we follow Jesus. It's possible that this time of isolation and quarantine has helped to deepen some relationships, but it has weakened or severed some others.

I invite you to reflect and respond. How is God calling you to deep relationship?

With the floodwaters behind you and the waters of baptism holding you, may you hear God's voice. May your relationship with the divine help to establish your identity with other people and the world in which you live. Amen.¹⁰

⁹ Luke 24:30-31

¹⁰ Adapted from *Leader*, Winter 2020-2021, p. 38.