

Fishers for People

from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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January 21, 2018

Psalm 62:5-12

⁵For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. ⁶He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. ⁷On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. ⁸Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. ⁹Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath. ¹⁰Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them. ¹¹Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, ¹²and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” ¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

A week ago I attended my annual preaching seminar. We are a group of Presbyterian pastors from around the country, who get together every January to study the upcoming biblical texts and discuss ways to preach them through the coming year. The group is changing now, because some of our early organizers are retiring giving us opportunity to invite new and younger pastors to join in, and we are the richer for it.

During one of our conversations last week a handful of us old-timers and new-comers got into a conversation about call. It went in a different direction than the usual – “Tell me about your call to ministry story” that pastors are asked a hundred times along the course of our careers. This year we talked about what it means to be called to preach in a time in which people are accustomed to changing the channel if - they don’t agree with what they hear. How do we dare say “The Word of the Lord,” after we read scripture, which is a way of saying this word is dependable and true, in this post-modern era when – you have your truth, and I have my truth, and people like Oprah Winfrey speak powerfully about the high calling to speak one’s own truth.

How does the church continue, as is our calling, to be a community with moral authority on serious matters before us which have become so politicized and divisive, and during a time in which all kinds of institutions, including the church have ceased to be respected as having moral authority? Some of the older members of our group admitted a certain grief about leaving an era in which the church was vested with a sort of natural authority. But one of the younger new members of our group said, “You know, I’ve never felt like I was given any moral authority as a preacher, all I have to offer is what the Bible says and I need to say that. The challenge these days,” he went on, “is the Bible tells of a God whose love is radical, and Jesus calls us into work for the common good which, by its nature, is political, and a lot of people don’t want to think about that.”

I have thought about that conversation all week while I have studied these mere six verses from Mark’s gospel. This call to follow Jesus Christ is radical, and Jesus calls us to carry out our mission in human communities and the “fishing for people” part is the challenge of being a disciple, doing the

Kingdom work for the common good. When Jesus called Simon and Andrew, James and John – those first disciples – got up and went. The account in Mark’s gospel is void of detail, no time to waste on job descriptions or resumes or interviews or any psychological consideration of vocational discernment. “Follow me,” Jesus said, and they followed... as simple as that, it would appear. Sometimes I wonder, when we are bringing new members into the church in our very Presbyterian way of doing evangelism, so decently and in order, that we ask them the wrong question.

We are required by the Book of Order to ask for Profession of Faith, or Reaffirmation of Faith: “Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?” When Jesus began his public ministry and was looking for people to join him, he did not bother to ask any question of faith, “Do you trust.... or Do you believe?” He announced it: The Kingdom of God is Good News! Then above the waves lapping at the shore, the sea gulls' cries, the father-and-son discussions about the family business, the back breaking task of mending fish nets... Jesus shouted – “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately, Mark says, they left their nets and followed him.

Follow, it is the most important verb, not only in this passage, but in any pilgrimage of faith, found at least eighty times in the gospels. Saying we believe in something is one thing. But following is another thing altogether. Theologian John Sobrino, in his now classic book *Christology at the Crossroads* wrote about what he called “Doxological statements,” or belief statements that we use to describe Jesus: King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Image of the Invisible God, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, very God of very God. These are eloquent things to say and melodious to sing. But the theologian presses his point, writing, “‘When someone says, Do you believe in Jesus Christ?’ it doesn't cost much. It has to do with whether I am able to give mental assent to the church's treasured propositions about the second person of the Trinity. I can do this with a nod, almost a wink. But when someone says, ‘Are you following Jesus?’ This involves my lifestyle, my values, my priorities, my surrender”. Then he goes on to say something very important: “These belief statements about Christ, can accompany an

experience of Jesus, or they can follow an experience of Jesus, but they cannot replace an experience of Jesus.”¹

What I think he means by that is the only way to experience Jesus is not simply to believe in him, or to trust in him, but to follow him – to experience his presence as he calls us forth from the old accustomed ways of doing what we do into his radical new ways of living in the world. Jesus said: Follow me, you fishermen, and I will make you fish for people. As if to say, I will use the skills you already have, but I will change your life's direction, not by your believing necessarily, but by following me into the difficult places of human community where the sick yearn for healing, families are tearing apart at the seams, the hungry need food, and the lost and cast out long to be brought back in.

No questions asked; no bargains struck; no attempt to persuade, no explanation given; to go where only God knows where. They were called and together they went with Jesus. Now if that is a bit intimidating to those of us who hold tightly to our nets – as I do, to our jobs, our families, our life as it is, then let me also be clear about this: in Mark's gospel, that day on the beach when they first responded to Jesus may have been the high water mark of their discipleship. Because they spend the rest of the gospel being more of a hindrance to Jesus than a help.

They do not understand Jesus' words; repeatedly Jesus rebukes them for their inability to see and comprehend their hardness of heart. They test Jesus and threaten to lead him astray from the path he has chosen toward the cross. Mark depicts the disciples as having left everything to follow Jesus, as wanting to be single-minded in their discipleship, and yet Mark also portrays them as failing to live out their commitment again and again.

In the words of my New Testament professor, Paul Achtemeier, “If there is any progression in the picture Mark paints of the disciples, it appears to be from bad to worse.” The reason is found in the words of Jesus himself when

¹ Susan Garrett, “Disciples on Trial,” *Christian Century*, April 15, 1998, p. 396 ff.

he says, “I will make you fish for people.” If they had merely gone after Jesus to a world apart, and sat at his feet and learned from his teaching, and had never crossed paths with a Pharisee or a demon or a child who had died or five hundred hungry people, they might have done quite well. But from the beginning their calling was to fish for people in the harsh realities of the world, and a world that is always changing, and there to create a community of followers.

This calling is not easy work, but we, like those pairs of brothers, are called to do it together. We all know that the bigger the crowd, the more difficult it is to manage, the harder it is to get along and agree and move forward. We also know that we live in culture that tries to dish up religion like warm chicken soup, something good for us to fill our souls, but tries to take the sting out of the radical call of Christ to go into places far beyond our comfort zone. Following Jesus is not so palatable. It leads us to the margins of society, and begs us to make room for the poor, the stranger, the foreigner, the sick and the cast-out and the downtrodden. And that leads us into difficult conversations about the social welfare of our world when we would prefer Christianity was about me and my relationship with my God. It never was and it never will be.

Jesus blesses us to be peacemakers in times of war and to work for justice in season’s conflict. He tells us the keys to his kingdom are in the hands of little children, and children are precious and loud and messy and honest. He asks us to touch sick people, and visit people in prison, and clothe people who cannot afford clothes. He asks us to – fish for people – which also means inviting others to join our journey of faith. He invites us to speak our faith to those who have not heard of the good news he offers, and he demands we live our faith by loving others with sacrificial and joyful abandon.

Dropping the nets and following may have been the easy part. It’s the fishing for people part that makes discipleship hard. The amazing thing about this story is that from that bumbling beginning of those first disciples, here we are, over two thousand years later, in a congregation that is growing again, and busy trying to be faithful to Jesus’ call:

by learning to love and forgive, by serving one another, and reaching out to so many of our local and global neighbors in need of Christ's compassion.

We don't get it right all the time any more than Simon and Andrew, James and John did. And in this new era of being Christian together in an increasingly pluralistic world rife with conflict and division we have to be creative in how we go about it together. Our institutional identity as a church, and our moral authority, is going to be called into question these days along with every other institution that seeks to lead people toward some common good. But we still have in our collective memory that brightly shining moment on the beach when Jesus called, and they dropped everything and followed to fish for people just like us.

That one moment is enough – to keep us going as we respond, sometimes in bold and risky ways, and also as we bumble along imperfectly. But let us never lose hold of the radical nature of his call: “Follow me,” Jesus shouts over his shoulder as he heads out – using his disciples to build up the Kingdom of God's good news in the world.

Chances are that in our following, we will also come to trust and believe in Jesus too. Amen.