

“To Be Fishers”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 21, 2018

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 23

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

New Testament Reading: 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.



Sermon: *“To Be Fishers”*

Most of us probably remember that story from Mark’s gospel where Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, James and John away from the only lives they’ve ever known to follow Him and become His disciples. Jesus uses a fishing metaphor because they are fishermen. But if you read different translations of the Bible, you’ll find that metaphor translated with slightly different variations. Some say, “I will make you fish for people,” but others say, “I will make you become fishers of people.”

But Dr. Ted Smith, who’s a professor at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, thinks the distinction is important and he believes that “I will make you to become fishers of people” is a better translation¹

You may not be able to see the difference or find the difference all that important, but translation *does* matter. The task of the translator is to capture not just the words, but the spirit of those words, which can be trickier than you might realize.

A friend of mine told me once that while travelling in Mexico, he stayed in a small hotel where the staff spoke very little English. When he checked in, it was a particularly warm day and he discovered that the air conditioner in his room did not work. So, he went down to the front desk and tried to explain to the clerk there that his room was too warm. But if the staff didn’t speak much English, my friend spoke even less Spanish.

So, he tried as best he could: “Caliente,” he said, gesturing toward his room. “Muy caliente.”

Now, the word “Caliente” *does* translate to the English word “hot.” But the *spirit* is very different. “Caliente” means “hot” as in “spicy.” And because of that, it can also mean “passionate” or “amorous.” The phrase he was looking for was “Tengo Calor” which means “I’m hot”. One wonders what the clerk might have thought as my friend beckoned towards his room emphatically repeating the words “Spicy; very spicy.”

So, when we translate the Bible from the Hebrew and Greek in which it was written, we need to capture not just the words, but their spirit. There are many such editorial choices to be made which is why there are so many different translations available.

Dr. Smith argues that the common translation, “I will make you fish for people’ makes it sound as if fishing for people were a *task*. ‘I will make you fishers of people’ receives fishing for people as a new identity.” Jesus isn’t saying that he will give them new jobs. Jesus is saying that he will give them new *lives*.² It’s the difference between doing a thing and *being* that thing.

For instance, you might play golf. But Rory McAlroy is a golfer. And you might cook your own meals, but Bobby Flay is a chef.

Elizabeth was one of the children in First Presbyterian Church Covington, GA where I served after graduating seminary. I met her when she was just in the third grade, but already she loved to dance. She took dance classes and danced in the local little theater production of the Nutcracker. All she ever wanted to do was dance and she worked at it constantly. For years she danced in small community theaters and in her high school theater department and in the dance troop at her university. She has studied dance, practiced dance, and loves nothing more than to dance. Today she is 27 years old and a professional member of the company at Elements Contemporary Ballet in Chicago.

Lots of people dance. Liz is a dancer.

My brother-in-law David and his wife Deb love to run. They run in good weather and bad. They run before work and after work on weekdays and in different road races almost every weekend. They run 5 Ks, 10 Ks, marathons and half-marathons. They eat like runners, buy expensive running shoes, read running magazines and the pictures on their living room walls are almost all of them before, during, or after crossing the finish line of a race.

Now, sometimes I will run, if I’m late somewhere or when I’m chasing Harry and Will Grey in the back yard. But Dave and Deb - they’re runners.

To do a thing once, or even on a semi-regular basis is not the same as *living* to do that thing. You can go out one day and fish. That’s an activity that you do, a task you would complete. But *to become a fisher* is to live the life of the one who eats, sleeps, and breathes fishing.

What Jesus calls these men to is not just another task, but a whole new way of life. This will not be the same old life except now they will spend a few hours each day helping Jesus. This will be a complete paradigm shift. No longer will they view the world through the eyes of simple fishermen; no longer will they live by the rules of the boat and the net, the ebb and flow of tides, the principles of supply and demand and the volatility of the sardine market. From this moment forward, they will live lives characterized by love of God and neighbor, listening to, and learning from their rabbi, Jesus and sharing

the good news of the gospel with the world around them. Jesus doesn't call them to wedge these activities into their already busy lives, he calls them to make *this* their new life.

How daunting an invitation that must have been for them to accept? They likely had no idea for what they were really signing up until they were well into it. I mean, we didn't, right? Every one of us has been extended the same invitation and almost every one of us has accepted it. But, did you know what you were in for when you did? Do you know now? In becoming disciples, we're called not just to follow; we're called not just to add an activity to our schedule like going to church once a week, or serving at the "Y" once a month. We're called to make loving and serving God the *most* important thing we do; we are called to eat, sleep, and breathe discipleship. We are called not just to do something Christ-like. We are called to *be* Christians.

Now I don't think that means that you have to quit your job like Simon and Andrew did, or leave your parents behind as James and John did. But it does mean that whether you are a teacher or a financial advisor; a butcher, baker, or candlestick maker, you are called to make that identity secondary to being a disciple. In everything that we do, we seek God's will and we do it for God. I know that's scary for a lot of you. We like to blend in. Being a full-time disciple probably makes us feel a little more conspicuous than we'd like. But nobody is asking you to stand on a street corner and preach. Jesus is asking us to change our lives; Not to just be Sunday Christians or Christmas and Easter Christians; And if we lived our discipleship... really *lived* it... what kind of difference might that make?

It would definitely make a difference in how we do things like church. Living what we profess 24/7 ought to make us more frequent attenders in worship, more joyful givers, and more avid participants in the broader life and work of the church. But it also would impact the way we see and experience the world around us.

It's a common cliché that "When you're a hammer, everything looks like a nail." But how does that saying translate to other things? How would it translate to being a disciple of Jesus Christ? "When you're a hammer, everything looks like a nail." And when you're a Disciple of Jesus, everything looks like ... what?

Well, everything looks like a part of God's creation, for starters. The world around us is not just a vast trove of resources to be consumed. It is a garden to be tended. For generations, Christians have mistaken the word "Dominion" in the Genesis creation story for tacit permission to make use of creation however we see fit. But if God made it for us to live in and to support our lives, then being a disciple should lead us to take care of that creation so that it can do the job for which it was made: supporting life for *all* God's children.

Which brings us to our second answer. When you're a disciple of Jesus, all the people look like children of God. Some would argue that we are more divided as a nation than ever before in our country's history. If you think so, then Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis would like to have a word with you.

But we do seem divided. It's hard to miss that. I would argue that is largely because we choose to see ourselves that way. When you look around the room, when you walk down the street, scroll through Facebook, what do you see? When you hear about the political back-and-forth in Washington, what do you see? When you read the news of war and violence and natural disasters, when you see images of the victims of those cataclysms, what do you see? If at any point along the way you're seeing "Us" and "Them," then take another look. We *should* see human beings, people, children of God; each with a story and a

history and a family somewhere that loves and worries about them. More to the point, the disciple sees every person as a life created and valued by God, bearing God's image, a member of God's own family.

We become divided when we overlook our common bond as Children of God and instead lift-up the things that characterize our personalities, but *don't* define who we are as Children of God - our politics, race, gender, ethnicity, how much money we have, what we've done in the past, in what country we were born.

That doesn't mean some of the loudest voices in the public arena *aren't* wrong. It doesn't mean some of the people we interact with everyday *aren't* obnoxious. And it doesn't mean that some people don't *really* need to learn how to use a turn signal every now and then. But the disciple sees *every* human being as God's beautiful child, deserving of our love, caring, and compassion.

And that takes real work and dedication to that work. Someone asked me last week after church, "How can you love everybody when some people are so infuriating, and some are downright evil?" Well, loving someone doesn't mean we like them, or what they do, or the principles for which they stand. Remember Paul's definition of love from First Corinthians 13 includes being patient and kind, rejoicing not in wrongdoing, but in the truth; he tells us that love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Paul never defines love as fondness or warm fuzzy feelings. You don't have to *like* all of God's children which is good news because many of them are not very likeable. But you do have to love them. That's what the disciple of Jesus does.

Which brings us to number three: When you're a disciple of Jesus, you realize that everyone is in need of forgiveness, including you. You see, God knows that we are all broken to some degree; that we are all sinful; that we have all done things of which we are not proud. But God does not hold those things against us. God allows us to face the consequences of our actions; we are not usually spared that, but those consequences do not include allowing our sins to become a barrier separating us from God's love.

Likewise, God doesn't want us to allow the sins we have committed against one another and the grudges we hold against people who have done wrong to us, to stand as barriers to our being able to love and care for one another, either.

At Hollywood Jesus this week we watched the movie *The Shack*. And there's a great line in there about forgiving others. God tells Mack, the main character who is struggling to forgive someone who has done an unspeakable evil "Forgiveness is not a relationship. It's letting go of his throat."

Forgiveness is hard. But it begins by letting go, by living in the present and not the past, and by working to see the one who has hurt us as a child of God. Even when that person is yourself.

Finally, when you're a disciple of Jesus, you see evidence of God's presence and activity all around you. In the beauty and complexity of creation, there is God. When the hungry are fed, the oppressed made free, and the lost saved, there is God. Where justice is done, where forgiveness is manifest, where love is shared, there is God. Where there is peace, grace, and a second chance, there is God.

Because we can see God active and present in the world around us, we know that God is in control. Oh, that doesn't stop us from messing-up things by trying to do our own thing. For evidence of that, just check your morning newspaper. The government shutdown in Washington is testimony to the human ability to mess-up things. But we understand that the question we should ask ourselves when we get out of bed in the morning, as our feet hit the cold floor and we shuffle-off in search of a hot shower, or a cup of coffee,

or pop tart, is not “What is the easiest path?” or “What will bring me the greatest benefit today?” but this: “What would God have me do and be today?”

God is in control, not us. So, everything that we do is done with God’s will in mind. Which means that we act out of trust in God more so than fear and self-interest. It doesn’t mean that we aren’t afraid sometimes. But it does mean that we face fearful things with confidence knowing that God is more powerful than anything we can encounter. So, when we look around and see people facing fearful things; people without enough to eat, without access to clean drinking water, who are oppressed by those in power, who are victims of war, for whom fleeing their homes and facing the unknown is their best option, then we know God’s will has not yet been fulfilled, and that there is work yet to be done.

And because we know that God is active in the world, we know that God is calling us, begging us in fact, to be a part of that work: to advocate for justice, to strive for peace, and to try to ensure abundant life for all God’s children.

One of the touchstone movies of my generation is *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*.³ There’s a scene where surfer Jeff Spicoli and his friends walk into a fast-food restaurant, take off their shirts, and sit down. Straight-laced Brad Hamilton, who works there, comes out from behind the counter and points to a sign on the door reminding patrons that if they do not wear shoes and shirts, they will be denied service. “You see that sign? Asks Brad.

Together Spicoli and his friends read out loud “No Shirt. No Shoes. No Dice.”

“Right,” says Brad. “Learn it. Know it. Live it.”

Essentially, that’s what Jesus tells these fisherman beside the sea of Galilee and it’s what He tells us as well: being a disciple, sharing the gospel, serving others, loving our neighbors and our enemies; these are not just things we do every now and then. This is who we are now; this is what we are called to be every day.

Learn it. Know it. Live it.

And when you do, you’ll discover the difference between going fishing and being a fisher.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

¹ Smith, Ted. "Mark 1:14-20, Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*. Ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown. Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 2008. 289. Print.

² Smith, 289

³ *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Dir. Amy Heckerling. Perf. Sean Penn, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Judge Reinhold. Universal Pictures/Refugee Films, 1982. DVD.