

“Fishers”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 7, 2021

Scripture Reading: Mark 1:14-20 (NRSV)

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: “Fishers”

When I read about Jesus, I am always amazed at the miraculous things he can do. Jesus heals the sick and walks on water and feeds 5000 people with just a little bit of food. And while you may not have noticed it, in this story, Jesus does something just as remarkable. Jesus asks people to do something and they just do it. As the parent of two teenage boys, who are constantly being inconvenienced by my irrational requests that they turn off the lights when they leave a room or put their trash in the trash can or, horror of horrors, that they help shovel the driveway after a snowstorm. That Jesus can ask and get an immediate affirmative response devoid of eye rolls, heavy sighs, or excuses is nothing short of miraculous.

I’m kidding, of course. But still, Jesus is asking a lot here. And he gets it. Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, in the middle of their work mind you, to drop everything and follow him. And they do. As a veteran of many officer nominating committees, I can tell you that getting an unqualified “Yes,” to a request to do something is an achievement worth celebrating.

But I want to take some time today to really dig into what Jesus was asking Simon and Andrew, and then James and John to do. We always read his invitation as “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” Which is how the NRSV actually translates Jesus’ words. But if you look at the Greek in which this passage was originally written, what Jesus actually says to them is “Follow me and I will make you fishers of people.” It’s a subtle difference, but one with tremendous implications for what it means for us to follow Jesus. You see, to fish for people, is a thing you do, an activity. But a fisher of people, is an identity. It’s who you are.

It’s like this: 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 all the time. They run 5 Ks, 10 Ks, marathons and half-marathons. They eat a runner’s diet, buy expensive running shoes, read running magazines, and the pictures on their living room walls are almost all of them before, during, or after running.

Now, I 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. And there is a vast difference between the two. To do a thing once; or even on a semi-regular basis is not the same as *living* to do that thing. You might play golf. But Rory McAlroy is a golfer. And you might cook your own meals, but Bobby Flay is a chef.

What Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James, and John 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 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 what they were really signing up for 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 watching

an online worship service once a week or making lunches for the Open Shelter 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 or leave your family and friends to become an itinerant evangelist. But Jesus *is* asking us to change our lives; to be more than just Sunday Christians or someday Christians. Jesus is inviting us to make our faith, our discipleship, our love for him central to everything we do.

And that kind of dedication; living what we profess 24/7 would have a tremendous impact on our lives. It would help us to be more aware of God's power and presence. It would help us to face challenges with confidence in God's guidance. It would 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 ought to 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 would that saying 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 a ... what?

Well, for starters, when you're a disciple of Jesus, everyone looks like a child of God. Because they are! People aren't just actors in some great production of which you are the star. Every single human being on earth is lovingly crafted by God and is cherished by God. The nice ones and the mean ones. The friends and the strangers. The ones who think like you and act like you, and the ones who don't. Every single one is a child of God and that means everyone is worthy of love and respect.

I'm not saying some of the loudest voices in the public arena *aren't* wrong. And I'm not saying some of the people we interact with everyday *aren't* obnoxious. And yes, some people *really* do need to learn how to use a turn signal. But being a 24/7 disciple is about loving all God's children, even when it's not easy.

And when I say love I'm not talking about affection or warm fuzzies. That's great if you can do it. But what I'm really talking about is what Paul describes in 1st Corinthians when he says that love is patient and kind, it is not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude.¹ If we can be those things to each other, then the world is already a better place whether we agree with each other or not.

Secondly, when you're a disciple of Jesus, everyone looks like a person in need of forgiveness, including you. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But God loves and forgives us anyway. Not because we are so good, but in spite of the fact that we can be so bad.² You see, God knows that we have all done things of which we are not proud. But God does not hold those things against us. God does allow us to face the earthly 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. Forgiveness is hard. But it begins by letting go of the past, by living in the present, and by working to see the one who has hurt you as a child of God. Even when, especially when, that person is yourself.

Finally, when you're a disciple, every day, every moment looks like an opportunity to practice being a disciple. When I was younger, I wanted to play the guitar. Not for fame and fortune, but more to impress girls and jam with my friends in a dirty garage somewhere. One year my sister bought me a guitar for Christmas, and I set about learning to play. But playing a guitar is not something you can learn by just reading a book or watching someone else play. It's something you have to learn by actually doing it. And if you've ever played the guitar, then you know it takes a lot of work and it can be really hard on your fingers. Those guitar strings are actually hard wires that dig into your flesh. You have to play for a long time and develop callouses on your fingertips to get really good. And that means lots and lots of practice. And it means enduring painful fingers before those callouses develop. And it means lots of mistakes and discordant notes in the process. I tried for a month or two, but eventually stopped. And today, I cannot play the guitar. Which is not surprising.

Discipleship is kind of like learning the guitar. There are going to be hard moments and there might even be some pain involved. But you can't just read about it or watch other people, you have to work at it every day. And you only get better

by doing it. If you don't, if you stop whenever it gets difficult, you will never be any good at it. Being a disciple is not a part-time gig. And to do it well, you have to practice every day.

And that's why Jesus doesn't just call us to "fish for people." He calls us to become "fishers of people" because he knows that the world needs us to treat following Jesus as a full-time job, not just a weekly pastime. That means we need to dedicate ourselves, every day, to lives of discipleship; to living the gospel, to sharing Christ with others in our words and in our deeds, and to loving selflessly and recklessly, with compassion and patience as God first loved us. That means loving one another, forgiving one another, and working each day to be more like Christ. And it means taking seriously Jesus call to follow him. Even when it's hard. Especially when it's hard.

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

End Notes

¹ 1 Corinthians 13, NRSV

² Romans 3:20-28, NRSV