



Sermon

Matthew 4:12-22
The Third Sunday After The Epiphany
January 27, 2008
Historic St. George's UMC
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. – Matthew 4:18-20

“Fishing for people.”

The first thing that phrase makes me think of is Vacation Bible School and singing “I will make you fishers of men, fishers of men, fishers of men.... if you follow me.” It was one of those up-out-of-your-seat-and-get-moving hand motion songs where you made gestures mimicking the casting of a fishing rod and then reeling in the catch. It was a song about evangelism back in the day when evangelism had more positive and less coercive connotations. It was a song about discipleship when you could talk in churchy language and expect that most people would understand what you meant. It was a song about bringing people to Jesus.

Aside from the warm fuzzy of that nostalgia, I'm not so sure that fishing for people is the most apt, attractive or effective metaphor for Christian witness anymore.

One the one hand, what more beloved symbol of early Christianity is there than the fish. I learned the Greek word for fish, in the aforementioned Vacation Bible and Sunday School –Icthus. It was a secret code word and symbol among early Christians in a time when to gather in or revere the name of Jesus could get you thrown in prison. Do you remember in religious movies about the years just after Jesus' death, how Christians would introduce themselves to one another scratching the fish symbol in the dirt. Icthus was an acronym and rebus form of our earliest confession of faith: Iesous Christos Theou, Yios, Soter or Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.

A Summons

No wonder fish and fishing are all over our stained glass windows, Sunday School take-home puzzles and Christian gift shop costume jewelry. We've all seen religious art in many a church featuring beautifully draped nets gleaming with colorful jewel like fish spilling out and over the edges. The antependia hanging from the pulpit where I'm preaching has a fish like that.

“Fishing for people.”

If becoming fishers for people is to be taken seriously as any kind of images of drawing people to God, then my wife and daughters will be no evangelists. The very measure of their discipleship may be in doubt given our family misadventures with hooks and worms (“This is so gross, Dad! EUCH!!!!”). Not to mention my frustration with them and their tangled reels. As a family, we couldn't catch a cold. And if we got lucky, then taking the fish off the hook and getting hold of the slippery, slimy, smelly thing would be another challenge all together.

Remind me NOT to tell you about the fishing trip I went on last summer off the choppy shores of Cape May, New Jersey. Suffice it to say the seas were rough that day and my stomach didn't hold. Because of that fact the fish ate well, if you get my drift. But I didn't catch a one.

And what about the fishes' point of view? Can you imagine a fish that enjoys being caught, cleaned and filleted for our culinary pleasure? Fishing for people? From the fishers or the fish end of the metaphor, is this analogy working?

Now there is a great difference in the ways most of us experience fishing from the ways the fisher-disciples in Matthew's gospel story practice the craft. They weren't hook, line and sinker fishers, they were netters.

Visiting Tiberius and Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, I saw no sport to what those fishermen did. What they did was hard work.

There were nets to be washed and mended, boats to be pitched, patched and repaired. And in Jesus time, the catch had to be sold the same day or smoked to be stored if it wasn't.

Maybe I've gone overboard with the whole fish and fishing metaphor. The good thing about metaphors is they're supposed to open imaginations more than lock them down. Even so, it would be a mistake to push the "fishing for people" metaphor too far. Our evangelistic fantasies might get out of whack. Soon we'll be asking at church council meetings about what bait we should be using or finding-out from neighboring churches what's biting for them. See what I mean about taking a metaphor too far? What kind of church looks to land unwitting congregants or lower nets in order to haul in some poor, unsuspecting catch.

Somehow I don't think that is what Jesus had in mind the day he called out to Peter, Andrew, James and John as they did their thing.

Here's what I'm seeing of that day: Jesus starting a conversation. Fishing was what they knew best. That's where the conversation begins. Right there – with what they knew best. NOT with what Jesus knows, but with what they know. "Follow me, you fisherman, and I'll make you fish for people!" There's even a sing-song, light hearted tone to Jesus appeal. "Come with me. I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass," says in Eugene Peterson's contemporary language translation *The Message*. Whatever the rendering, the words are spoken in a way fisherman would appreciate, something they would understand – a word that meets them where they are and grows from what they know.

Here's what I'm taking from that day by the Sea of Galilee for my life and yours. It's a brilliant stroke, really. Jesus' call to each of us begins NOT with what he knows, but with what we know. Jesus call to each of us begins not with what he does best but with what we do best. It begins where we are. It begins and grows from our turf, in our language, in our idiom.

"Follow me, you fishing people, and I will make you fish-for-people." It's amazing if you think about it. Before we hear a word

about what's involved in Jesus calling "Follow me", he reassures us that we can do it, because it's not so different from what we've already done or are doing or like to do or feel some deep-down burning desire to do. In fact, we already have some of the job skills involved. We just have to adapt what we know.

So, the question is, what's Jesus gonna do with you right where you are?

Why we might play around with some of other calls Jesus might have extended and come up with:

- Follow me you farmers and I will make you turn-over some new ground and (maybe like in the parable) find some hidden treasure buried in the field.
- Follow me you bankers, tellers and clerks and I will make you investors in what really counts, really saves hearts, souls and lives.
- Follow me you teachers and care givers and I will make you eye openers.
- Follow me you retired ones and I will make you a new life you could never have had before.
- Follow me you seamstresses and tailors and I will make you sewers of remnants stitching something new, strong and beautiful.
- Follow me you butchers, bakers, cooks and chefs and I will make you season, leaven, serve and preserve more than food.
- Follow me you ministers and I will make you more than a manager.
- Follow me church and I will make you open hearts, open doors and open minds.
- Follow me you friends, you parents, you children, you brothers and sisters, you neighbors, you hosts, and guests, and I will make you all these things to every other human being.

If I left you off this list, be sure that Jesus doesn't. The real question in the "fish for people" metaphor is: What is Jesus, what is God's kingdom calling to right where you are – with your gifts, your joys, your energies, your interests, your skills, your passions. It's not as difficult as you might think because,

as Matthew gospel says about that day with the fishers, Jesus starts where we already are.

Matthew and the rest of the gospels tell us is Jesus didn't call the likes of Peter, Andrew, James and John (or later the likes of Mary and Martha) because they were especially religious, spiritual, faithful or had a better grip on God than anyone else. If anything the gospels tell us is they were forever missing the point, jockeying for position and when the chips were down, interested in nothing more than saving their own skins. Their sole qualification – stop and think about it – was their willingness to rise to their feet when Jesus said:” Follow me.”

And when Jesus sent them into the world, starting from where they already were, his instructions were simple: preach that God's time is now, and heal brokenness. That's it. None of it depended on anything other than doing what they were going to do for God's sake bringing God's realm closer and closer because you're doing it. And doing healing things.

We have a way of making Jesus' call to the likes of you and me into just a fish story – a bigger thing than it really is. I'm just hoping we don't fail to catch this: Jesus call to each starts not just with what he knows but what we know. It begins not just with what he does best but what we do best.

It's not as difficult as we might think. Again, today, God in Jesus is calling to where you already are. How will you let your life answer? How will you let your life speak?

Take a deep breath and follow. And do what you do for Jesus' sake.

Amen.

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“Will you love the “you” you hide if I but call your name?

Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?

Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around,

through the sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name?

Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.

In your company I'll go where your love and footsteps show.

Thus I'll live and move and grow in you and you in me.”

The Summons, John Bell