

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, Jan 22, 2023

Text: Matthew 4:12-23, the calling of the first disciples.

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Says Jesus

How many of you like to fish? I find fishing relaxing. Some find it boring. However, it is so much fun when your bobber goes under, or when you get a fish on while trolling, “fish on”, or when the flag goes up on your tip up, which hasn't happened a whole lot this year. The goal in our kind of fishing is to trick the fish into biting on your bait, whether it's live or artificial. And then when you get a fish on the excitement begins, you can't wait to get it to the surface to see what it is. I had a fish on once that was so big... how big was it you ask?... it was so big that it started pulling me around lake Winnebago in my Kayak... that is until the line snapped. It never left the bottom.

In Jesus' time, fishing involved nets. You would drop your net and circle around an area in your boat and then pull up the nets to see what was there. It was hard work, rigging the boat, tying the nets, casting the nets, and pulling the nets. Sometimes you would fish all night long and get no fish. They didn't have fish finders or Vexilars. Although Jesus did tell them to cast their net on the other side of the boat once and they got a miracle catch of fish.

It was also hard in the first Century on the Sea of Galilee knowing that the large majority of your catch wasn't your own. Part of the appeal of fishing is eating the fish, giving them away to family and friends, or making a living. Their fish would go to Roman Empire to feed their rich appetites and power structures. One commentary I read said the fisherman would only get to keep 1/3 of their catch. They would pledge so much to the Roman Empire up front and then keep whatever they caught beyond that. It was a life of debt... you were constantly living under the crushing load of a debt of fish to the Roman Empire. Most of us know how being in debt can crush our spirits.

So, when Jesus comes calling his first disciples, we are told they left their nets immediately. Peter and Andrew dropped their nets as they were fishing. James and John, the Zebedee brothers left their father and their nets right in the middle of mending them. There was no conversation with Jesus about saying long goodbyes to family and

friends. They obeyed Jesus' command to follow immediately. Do you have this same sense of immediacy in following Jesus? Does your life of faith take precedence over other things that call for your allegiance? That's a tough one for us humans.

Why were they so willing to leave their jobs and families to follow Jesus? Were they fed up with their jobs, the pay, the hard work, the Roman oppression? Were the Zebedee brothers mad at their father and couldn't wait to leave? We don't know for sure. We just know by their action to follow.

Or was Jesus offering something beyond all human measure. Our lessons today describe what God was up to in Jesus as a light that shined in the midst of the darkness of the world. Jesus was willing to take up residence in Gentile controlled territory... preaching an alternative message of hope, and "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near." In Jesus, God's reign of justice, peace, and healing had arrived. It had come near in the person of Jesus. The simple act of dropping the nets was a true sign of repentance... of a life change. Following Jesus promised them hope and a new life. What nets do you need to leave behind that aren't life giving?

For those who have kids, knowing your children will one day fly the coup is a reality. It can be a painful change for a family. Sometimes children leave under good circumstances. Other times, they can't wait to leave your household power structure and get out on their own. Deep down, I believe all children and parents want a healthy relationship... but our sin and pride sometimes gets in the way.

The bottom line in our Gospel for today is that Jesus calls ordinary people like you and me to partner in sharing the kingdom of heaven on earth. And that involves a choice... to follow or not to follow. You are all here... that says something. I like how Jesus called people in the middle of their work to follow. I like how Jesus uses whatever skills we have to advance the kingdom. Each of us is unique and we shouldn't compare our gifts with others. Jesus saw something he needed with these fishermen. He knew they worked hard. They knew the context of subsisting under the Roman Empire. Jesus needed net casters for his kingdom.

We are all fishers of people. And whether you know it or not, you are always fishing... with your words and actions. Our job isn't to trick people into following Jesus, or using the bait and switch. It is to attract people with the love and grace of God for them and the whole world... to invite people into a crazy love that Paul calls the foolishness of the cross... in our second lesson.

The cross, prior to the resurrection was only a symbol of cruelty, loss, and death. After Jesus rose from the dead, the cross received its power. God was in fact saving the world in apparent weakness. God's power was made perfect in the weakness of the cross. That means God is found in our times of loss and weakness too. We are not abandoned by God when we experience the crushing blows of life. Jesus is with us always to the end of the age.

To me, this is how you fish for people... as a person of the cross. The most attractive Christians are those who are willing to show weakness, to be vulnerable, to admit their mistakes, to ask for forgiveness. We are all human and will fall short daily. I feel in the church, we sometimes expect perfection from each other. However, we are all in the same boat. We all need the grace of God equally, and a community that lifts us up.

Today, we receive this grace in knowing that Jesus' still calls ordinary and flawed people like you and me to share the kingdom, and that in Holy Communion we are promised forgiveness and called to keep fishing.