

Pastor's Message – 1/24/21
Mark 1:14-20

Last week's worship focus and this week's are similar: discipleship and evangelism – answering the call of Jesus. We're actually going backwards in time with our Bible reading today. Last week, Philip had already answered Jesus' call and invited Nathanael who then came. But what happens next?

Today's Gospel is about Jesus' calling of his first four disciples. It is about the first people who were called to hold the job which we hold today. Mark's story is not very elaborate. It is short and to the point: Mark's trademark. There is a certain note of adventure as the four men leave their fishing business to go with Jesus, but there is not much in the story that seems terribly upsetting or provocative.

What the story doesn't tell us is what those men were getting in for by becoming followers of Jesus. To find out what was really in store for them, we have to keep reading. And what we discover is that being a disciple was not glamorous. In fact, it was downright dangerous.

Later in Mark's gospel we hear Jesus say, "Whoever loses his life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will find it." Matthew includes another comment: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Those are disturbing statements, especially for those of us who are today's disciples.

Knowing this, why would anyone want to be a follower of Jesus? Why is it that first Simon and Andrew, and then James and John, dropped everything to be with Jesus? I wonder if it was because Jesus made it crystal clear that these two sets of brothers were not only important to him, but they were important to the community, they were important to the Kingdom of God. No doubt, Simon and Andrew and James and John had heard about Jesus already, because Jesus had been preaching in Galilee for some time before He invited these guys to get involved in the work of the kingdom. Simon and Andrew and James and John knew where Jesus was coming from because, not only had somebody already told them about Jesus, but that somebody must have been excited about Jesus, and that excitement was catching.

Jesus makes it clear and Mark makes it a focal point of his Gospel. His understanding of Jesus' message is in verse 15: "The time promised by God has come at last!" he announced. "The Kingdom of God is near!" Jesus has a new and better way. Our nation, our communities, our church cannot continue indefinitely with the status quo. It's urgent! The kingdom of God is at hand and there is good news: we do not have to worry about whether we have the strength alone to take the urgent risk. Jesus promises His strength and His guidance.

I put a lot of time and effort into building a worship service each week that is

faithful to the Bible reading for the day. I used to think that I had to design a worship service that would be so compelling that no one would even consider missing any Sunday. But it doesn't start and end there. Jesus expects us to invite people, but we should not confuse this with simply being "welcoming." Welcoming should happen without question. As followers of Jesus who have heard and answered His call, we are not seeking simply to welcome, but to ask others to join with us to become disciples of Jesus also or to strengthen their discipleship to Jesus.

Each church has its own personality and gifts and strengths. We need to ask and continually review what is the spirit of this church, and what you have to offer that would make people want, not just to come, but to stay and to belong? The answer is fairly simple! It's not about being located in a certain community. It's not about who lives there and whether or not you have the right kinds of programs or the right kind of theology or the right look or the right kind of music. It's not about YOU.

What you have to offer is simply that you are the church of Jesus Christ. You are a community of Christ's people. You are the bearers of the good news that the Kingdom of God is near. You are the ones who call upon people to rethink their lives, to rethink their priorities, and to put God first! You are the ones who say to your community, "You belong here! You are welcome here! If you want to be, you can be part of this congregation."

Whom does Jesus call to do that work? When we read the first chapter of Mark's gospel, we see that Jesus called busy people: men who were working, men who were already doing something. Does that tell us something?

They were fishermen and they would have kept on fishing the rest of their lives. What else was there for them to do? They trimmed their sails. They let down their nets and cleaned them after a night of fishing. They took their fish to the market. But then ... but then Jesus entered their lives. They would keep fishing, but now they would fish for people. That's still the call of Jesus.

I've never been a fisherman, but I understand that most fishermen or fisherwomen don't need much of a reason to go fishing. Any old excuse will do. However, there are certainly different reasons for going fishing. The men in the gospel fished for a living. Others fish to gain peace of mind, still others for the challenge of outsmarting the fish. Jesus called Andrew, Peter, James and John to become fishers of men. The object was not to gain something for themselves but to give something (the gift of eternal life) to others.

Jesus challenges us to decide what is important to us. What's worth our energy and our effort and our passion? Are we willing to get passionate and excited about what God is passionate about?

Those who have followed in the footsteps of Peter, James and John have also been fishermen and women. The Christian church is the world's largest fishing

society. Our commission by Christ is to Go Fishin'! To bring men and women into the kingdom of God.

Imagine a fishing club where the members merely sat around swapping fish stories about the big one they landed, the whopper that broke away, but they never stepped into a boat or cast their line in the water. What kind of a fishing club would it be whose members were content to admire the trophies on the wall but never to go out and actually go fishing? A lot of churches are like that. They sit around bragging about the days when their boat was full of fresh fish. They look nostalgically to the days when the main purpose of their church was to go fishing, to reach others for Christ. But they never actually go fishing, they merely talk about going fishing. That's not what we're about as a church.

What does it mean to go fishing with Jesus? First of all, you have to look forward to fishing. It isn't something that fills you with fear, frustration or dread. It gives you joy to see lives changed by the power of God's love. But let's face it, we're not going to enjoy something until we try, then we land a few, share the joy of the catch with others and then work on becoming a better fisherman.

Secondly, you go where the fish are. The reason many fishermen get skunked is they don't go where the fish are. What does that mean for us as a church? We find where the needs are and then seek to meet them. And there are any number of needs in our communities that we are called to act on. Furthermore, we can't just fish in the same old way and the same place we always have. Nor can we expect the fish to swim to us. We must seek to attract them with the gospel at the point of their need.

Thirdly, you have to use the right bait. I've heard that if you're fishing for crappies, you'd better not use worms. You might catch one now and again on a worm but might have better luck with minnows. I know it sounds crass to talk about bait when it's people you're talking about. We're not trying to trick people, so that we can get them to the place where we can feed on them or take advantage of their gifts. We aren't trying to lure people to their death but to a life with God that is eternal.

Some churches use entertainment. Other churches promise prosperity and happiness. Others still appeal to social prestige. The only bait worthy of the Gospel is love. Love which accepts people where they are. Love which is shown through actions. God has given each of us people that perhaps only we can reach with the gospel. Think about it. Who are they? Identify them. Write their names down. Then reflect on specific ways that you can share God's love with them. Maybe they need a friend. Perhaps they have kids and would appreciate a chance to get away by themselves. Offer to baby-sit. A parent has died. Send them a card of condolence. Call them up a week or two after the funeral. You get the idea. Now do it! Do it as a fisher of men and women. If we let God use us as His love connection, He will amaze us with the results. Of course, we are not accountable for results. That's up

to the Lord. All that God asks us to do is to be fishermen and fisherwomen for Christ. All God asks is that we use the gifts we have already been given.

Itzhak Perlman, one of the greatest violinists of all time played at Lincoln Center in New York City in 1995. Perlman, afflicted by polio since he was a child, walked on stage with heavy braces on both legs. He also needed crutches in order to walk. On this occasion as he was playing, suddenly there was a loud noise, one of the strings on his violin broke. Most people thought Perlman would leave the stage and get another violin.

Instead, he sat there for a few moments, closed his eyes, and asked the conductor to begin again. He played the entire piece with great passion on just three strings. You can imagine the applause when Perlman concluded his performance. When the cheering stopped, Perlman explained: "Sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."

Time and time again we think our resources are too small to accomplish anything significant, but when we bring what we have to Jesus he has a way of multiplying what we bring into something greater than we could ever dream could happen.

I see that too often. There are people who have gifts, but it can be close to impossible sometimes to get them to do what they are best at, to do that for which they have been given gifts, for the Kingdom of God and for the church.

Jesus calls us to live by God's priorities, to answer His call, and to make our choices as if we are already citizens of the Kingdom of God. What sorts of things might you have to walk away from to follow Jesus' call? What sorts of things, what former ways of being and living are you called to leave without even looking back? Are there things you might still do, but do differently and for different reasons?

Jesus calls us to stewardship: to use the gifts we have been given for the eternal life of the world. What shape will your personal stewardship take? What will you give? Time? Spiritual gifts? Care? Prayer? Money?

There are many gifts and there are many needs. There are people in this church who have the gifts to meet the needs of the world and the church and to build the kingdom of God: to do the fishin' in the right places with the right people and in the right way. But it won't happen, and the Kingdom and the church won't grow unless that is done. If everyone in the church brought another person to worship on any given Sunday, we'd have double the number in church. Maybe they won't come, but if everyone in the church invited someone else, we would see the Kingdom of God unfolding.

Now is the time! "The time promised by God has come at last!" "The Kingdom of God is near!" Right here. In this place. At this time. There are plenty of fish who need what we have already received: the good news that the Kingdom of God has come.