



“Fishing and Following”

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Mark 1:14-20

When I served as the Associate Pastor at Northside Drive in Atlanta, I had the privilege of speaking to the children each week during the children’s time. Several years ago, this Mark text was our Gospel reading for the morning and I decided to do a little fishin’. I got an old fishing pole and attached a cutout of a person to the end of the line. Then I put the end of the line behind the pulpit and let out some slack. As I began to tell the story of Jesus calling his first followers, I told the kids that Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen. Then I showed them the fishing pole. I emphasized that the first disciples probably had nets, rather than fishing poles, because they needed catch a lot of fish at the same time, but that I was doing us all a favor by not bringing a stinky cast net into the sanctuary.

I then shared with the kids that these fishermen left everything behind, their nets, their boats, their families, their friends, and they followed Jesus. They wanted to learn from Jesus and to rescue people from pain, fear, and injustice. When I got to the part in the story where Jesus asked the disciples to be fishers of people, I reeled in the line and showed them that I had just caught a person, not a fish. I asked the kids if we were really supposed to have a fishing pole in our back pockets and go out into the world to hook some folks by the mouth. Of course, the answer was no. But what I asked them to do was to draw people in, pull people close by showing them the love of God. And I reminded them that if they followed the example of Christ, then people would be reeled in to Jesus like fish on line.

Isn’t it strange that Jesus would tell someone to fish for people? How would you respond if someone walked up to you and asked, “Hey, I need you to drop everything, give up your job, your family, and your future to follow me. And by the way, I’ll make you people-fishers.” It’s kind of strange, right? But it was actually a clever way to connect these first followers’ current occupation with the future that Jesus had planned for them. It was a really good “hook” to help them understand what was in store. You see, fishing was a popular trade on the Sea of Galilee. Fishing was the most common occupation for people residing in the small villages of Capernaum and Bethsaida which were located on the lakeshore. Living on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, with its abundant supply of fish, people understood fishing perhaps more than they did farming. Living on the shores of a fishing lake, the whole town was “into fishing.”

The message of Jesus to these first disciples was that they were called to become “fishers of men” or fishers for people. Jesus used the metaphor of fishing because people in a fishing village with numerous fishermen would understand the terminology. These Galileans intuitively understood this fishing metaphor because it was a way of life for them. Fishing was their occupation, their way of making a living, their primary way of putting food on their tables. And Jesus always used metaphors that his disciples could understand. Jesus didn’t ask them to be like shepherds and gather the flock or be like harvesters and bring in the sheaves. If they had been

carpenters, he would have invited them to become builders of human hearts. If they had been military personnel, he would have asked them to capture and conquer the kingdom. But they were fishermen and Jesus used a fishing metaphor to speak to their minds and their spirits.

And it is indeed interesting that the very first thing Jesus did when he started his earthly ministry was to go to the lake, to the backwoods towns on its shore, and find fishermen, the lowest and most despised folks in the growing Roman empire. You see, Galilee had become an important resource for the urban elite, and most of the fish these fishermen caught was salted and shipped all across the region. And when the transportation of fish grew in popularity, the local economy of Galilee began to change. As roads, harbors, and processing plants were built in the region, these infrastructure improvements functioned to diminish, drain, deplete, and deprive formerly self-sufficient fishing families like Peter and Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee. Taxes and tolls sky-rocketed, while the fish that used to be caught for local families was exported to the Roman citizens. Thus, fishermen were increasingly marginalized and became the most impoverished people in the region. And we see that these Roman elites looked down on them, even though they depended on the Galilean fishermen for the food they ate. Roman poet, Cicero, harshly wrote, “The most shameful occupations are those which cater to our sensual pleasures: fish-sellers, butchers, cooks, poultry-raisers and fishermen.” Another ancient Egyptian papyrus stated, “The fisher is more miserable than any other profession.”

Ched Myers, an American theologian specializing in political theology and biblical studies, did some research into the fishing industry in Jesus’s time. He described the remnants of a first century fishing boat, discovered in 1985 at the bottom of the Sea of Galilee and how it symbolized the hard life of peasant-fishermen. The 27x7 foot boat had both oars and a sail, and could hold up to thirteen people. It appeared to have been rebuilt at least five times from seven different kinds of wood in all manner of patching, indicating the use of materials from other boats. Also, all reusable material had been removed from the sunken boat before it was finally jettisoned into the sea, no longer repairable. This remarkable artifact gives concrete evidence of the marginal existence of the fishermen.

With such stifling Roman control over their livelihood and the oppressive economics of the fishing profession, it is hardly surprising that in this story the fishermen are the first converts to Jesus’ message about an alternative social structure. Restless peasant fishermen had little to lose and everything to gain by overturning the status quo. Myers contends that “Jesus’ strategic decision was not unlike Gandhi’s attempts to mobilize the ‘untouchable’ classes in India in campaigns such as his famous Salt March, or Martin Luther King’s fateful choice to stand with the sanitation workers of Memphis in 1968.” Peter, Andrew, James, and John had been fishing for a way to change the world and now, with a new prophet and teacher on the scene, they could free themselves from their marginalized existence and learn how to fish for people. They could follow the one who would bring justice to those who were suffering injustice, bring hope to those who were hopeless, and bring healing to those who were hurting. They had spent their lives fishing in the waters of rejection and now it was time to follow the one who would teach them to fish for righteousness and bring people out of their pain and poverty.

And after following, the disciples would be the ones to finish what Jesus started. They would be the ones most capable of fishing for people because they knew what it meant to be caught be the

Savior. They, like fish in a net, were caught and taken out of a safe place, with safe careers, and safe families. They were caught up in the net of Jesus's words, wisdom, and power and cleaned and prepared for a life of service. They died to their old lives just as fish die when taken from the sea. Being a follower of Jesus means that our lives will indeed change and we will have to give up our old lives. The disciples did it as they gave up fishing in order to follow. They had indeed been caught by Jesus and they died to their old selves. And we too must realize that when we bring in the daily catch and ask people to sacrifice for Jesus, that we were already caught ourselves, caught by the love and the power of our Savior.

Tom Long, preacher, professor, and author, believes that there's a reason why we find Jesus in Galilee when he utters his very first words and begins his ministry in the Gospel of Mark. It's because these are the humble and hurting trappings that match the ministry Jesus was launching. Galilee was the place where Jesus was needed the most, among those fishing for hope in the midst of the injustices of the current empire. Many of us, too, live in the Galilees of the world, on the margins, in those places where the powers-that-be do not visit and where they take advantage of the hard work of others. This story of discipleship starts in Galilee because the Galilees of this life, and us fisherfolk who live there, are the places and the people Jesus came to rescue. That means that we are being called today to move from fishing, to following. For if we do, we understand that this humble beginning of the gospel is where we live and that Jesus wants to catch every last one of us.

We have a choice to make as we seek to be a church that gives hope and healing to those being hurt by the powers of this world – will we simply continue to fish the lonely lake, minding our own business, and content to live on the edge? Or will we answer the call of Christ, be like Peter and Andrew and leave our nets, be like James and John and leave our family, in order to follow Jesus into the justice and the joy of God? Are we fishing or are we following?

Amen.