

The Call to Follow and Fish

Mark 1:14-20
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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For the third week in a row, now, I'm going to be addressing an aspect of what it means to be **called by God**. A couple of Sundays ago, I explored how we are called, by virtue of our baptism, into authentic community. A very important element of living into that kind of community is the compassion we have and demonstrate for one another. Last Sunday, in both my most personal and longest sermon that I ever preached, I shared my own sense of God's calling me into ordained pastoral ministry. But I also commented how each and every one of us is called to ministry and service of one type or another. And I encouraged you to explore what that might entail for you here at College Hill.

This Sunday, following the Gospel reading of Jesus calling a group of four fishermen to drop everything and follow him, I now want to explore how we are also called to follow Jesus, the one we also call Lord. I could use the broad category of our general call to discipleship. However, in this biblical text there is a narrower focus than discipleship in all its many aspects. At this particular juncture in Mark's gospel, which you will note is only the 14th verse of the first chapter, Jesus tells these fishermen that they will no longer be catching fish, but rather will be fishing for people.

Mark writes that as Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee he saw a man named Simon (who will later be renamed Peter) and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea. I get a big kick out of Mark adding, "for they were fishermen," as if his readers needed an explanation of why two grown men are throwing a net into the sea. Jesus simply tells them, "**Follow me and I will make you fish for people.**" Without any explanation of why, Mark tells us that they "immediately left their nets and followed" Jesus. This is followed by a similar story of Jesus calling out to two other brothers, James and John. Still without explanation, Mark tells us that these fishermen immediately leave their father Zebedee and the hired hands sitting in the boat.

For modern readers like ourselves, this is a somewhat disquieting story. There is no explanation of these fishermen's motivation for leaving everything and everyone behind just because they found someone compelling. But we need to remember that this story isn't necessarily historically factual. Rather it is simply a literary genre we know as a "**call story**," dozens of which occur throughout the Old and New Testaments. The call to Old Testament prophets, like Moses, Jonah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and all the others, are call stories of which Mark has mimicked in his own telling of the call of the first disciples.

A primary characteristic found in all biblical call stories is the abruptness and need for total commitment demonstrated by those being called. In the case of Simon and Andrew, they gave up their profession in order to follow Jesus. James and John gave up more than that, for they also violated the patriarchal system of their day by not asking the permission of their father, but simply left him sitting in the boat.

So rather than attaching too literal of an interpretation to these call stories, their primary purpose was to indicate that **discipleship always has a cost. We, like they, are**

therefore being informed that most likely we must be willing to give up something in order to share the good news to others. Think about it, there is no ministry that doesn't bear a cost, whether it be in the form of the sharing of our time, our talents and abilities, and yes, at times our financial resources.

Another major point of any call story is the **response** of those being called by God. Here are some examples. **Moses'** first response was to say that he had a speech impediment and that God should send somebody else. The Old Testament prophet, **Jonah**, at first responded by hightailing it in the opposite direction of where God wanted him to go. That's until God called to Jonah a second time! Makes me wonder how many times God calls us before we respond by following. In contrast, without protest **Isaiah** responded with, "Here I am, Lord, send me!" There was more than one tear shed when we sang the hymn of the same name last Sunday.

The **four fishermen** in Mark's account responded by immediately following Jesus and joining him in his ministry. The strangest part of that story is that they did so without any explanation of what Jesus was actually calling them to do, except to "fish for people."

If you and I are also called by God in one fashion or another to a particular ministry of one type or another, which I believe we are, then it makes sense that we should also pay careful attention to how we respond. Even if we begin by giving some kind of justification of why God must have gotten the wrong person, do we usually end up responding by following the call or not? This congregation, for 100 years now next month, has a strong history of answering the call to discipleship. We will be reflecting more upon this during this year.

But as I mentioned last Sunday, trying to precisely describe just how God calls us varies, I believe, from person to person. I've always contended that **God speaks to each individual's heart, mind and spirit in the way that that person can hear and understand.** Again, that most likely depends upon each person's own theological understanding of God. Not only that, how we hear God's call may even change in time throughout our own journey of faith. It has in mine.

I believe there are a few things, however, that might help us to hear, to discern God's call to follow. **As far as your personal ministry within the life of this congregation is concerned, I would suggest that God is calling you to the particular service that excites you the most; the type of ministry that you feel most passionate about; the projects that energize you, not drain you.** That is an exercise that I suggest at our annual Session Retreats, when the elders seek to discern what ministry team to serve on during the coming year. I would suggest the same exercise to you.

Again, however, the initial call to those four fishermen was more focused. Upon hearing Jesus' call to follow, they started a new kind of fishing – fishing for people. If an element of our own calling involved a similar directive, then what exactly does that mean? I agree with most biblical interpreters that consider **the phrase "fish for people" as a way to invite other people into the ministry that lives out and furthers the kingdom or realm of God.**

The term that perhaps describes this element of discipleship this best is **evangelism.** While this term has fallen out of favor with most Presbyterians, it is one that I am trying desperately to reclaim. **Evangelism doesn't have anything to do with any particular theological perspective, like evangelicalism. Rather, it is simply putting a focus on sharing the good news with others, and inviting them to join us along the journey within this particular community of faith.**

One of the things that we learned in last year's Visioning Study, which will be implementing this year, is a desire to learn more effective ways (like social networking) of sharing this good news and inviting others along with us.

God continues to call you and me, and us together as College Hill, to this new kind of fishing. And as always, how you and I respond to that particular call to discipleship is up to each one of us. Both the spiritual and practical elements involved with discerning God's call to discipleship are extremely important to me personally and pastorally, and, I believe, to the ongoing health and growth of this congregation. So we will continue to explore these issues throughout this year, including how we are discerning a call to "fish for people," and how, in particular, that impacts our Evangelism & Communication ministry team efforts.

Hear and respond to Jesus' call to follow and to fish.

Amen.