

“Go Fish!”
Based on Matthew 4: 12-23
by Rev. Meghan Davis
Longview Presbyterian Church—January 23, 2011

‘[Jesus] said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him.’ [Jesus] called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

In context, in the Gospel of Matthew, this is the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. This passage comes immediately after his baptism, his time in the wilderness and his temptation. Matthew’s Jesus begins his ministry by recruiting disciples. “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

Most of us are more familiar with “fishers of men;” it’s a great play on words, Jesus telling Peter and Andrew that he’ll turn them from fishermen to fishers OF men. “Fishers of men” has a nice ring to it; it rolls off the tongue a little easier than “fishers for people.” But “fishers of men” misses an important aspect of the Gospel message and Jesus’ ministry. Jesus called people to follow him, and be in community together, regardless of social status, religious or ethnic background or gender. The Kingdom of God that Jesus offers—God’s Reign—is offered for *all*, and therefore “fishers for people” is the preferred translation.

But what did that *mean*: fishers for people? Jesus was recruiting these fishers to both discipleship and to evangelism, but what a way to do it. I don’t know why, but as a teenager I was uncomfortable with the metaphor of “fish for people.” Perhaps it was because I didn’t like fishing, or maybe it evoked an image of people being trapped in nets. More likely, I just thought it was a weird thing to say. And I couldn’t imagine how, “I will make you fish for people” would be compelling enough for the disciples to drop everything and follow Jesus.

But “fish for people” must have been a metaphor that resonated for these for individuals. Fishing was not only their job, but their way of life. In Jesus’ time, professions were inherited. If you were born to a family of fishers, you would be a fisher. You wouldn’t become a shepherd, or carpenter or anything other than a fisher. And fishing was backbreaking work with very little financial pay-off. Fishers worked in family based cooperatives, sharing the risks and burdens of the business.¹ But as difficult as fishing was, it was a *living* and a way of life. Discipleship was a way of life, too, but it certainly was not a living. Why did the disciples abandon everything they knew, to follow Jesus? It’s not as if they were getting a better job offer, they were going from low income to no income without a question.

¹ NIB p. 40

We know this story well. It's the "Jesus calls the disciples" story. Each Gospel has a version of this story. We heard John's account last week. The accounts in the Gospels of Mark and Luke are very similar to Matthew's. These fishers left everything: their livelihoods and their families, to follow this guy from Nazareth. It's easy to see that that's a pretty big deal, pretty out of the ordinary. It's easy to get a sense for how dramatic this story is. I imagine it as a big Broadway musical number kind of like the "Jet Song" from *Westside Story*. It starts off with just Jesus, the music low... maybe he's snapping, then he calls Peter and Andrew, they throw down their nets and follow, then Zebedee's boys join in. The music grows as the number of people grow and by the time you get to the end of the song, you have the entire cast following Jesus. A show stopper.

Maybe that's just me. However we picture the scene, we can identify with the disciples and are moved by the drama of their dropping everything to follow Jesus. But perhaps we take the call of Jesus for granted. While it *was* common for teachers—rabbis—to have disciples, it was *not* common for teachers to recruit followers. Rather, the would-be disciple would seek out the teacher, convince the teacher to take them on as a disciple. Perhaps they would even have to prove themselves to the teacher. Just as today's would-be interns have to apply for positions, often with stiff competition. Usually, mentors don't go looking for mentees.

But Jesus seeks out his disciples to follow and to evangelize—to spread the Gospel—to tell the Good News. This is one of many indications that Jesus is no ordinary teacher. Additionally, the *rabbi*/disciple relationship was defined by learning. But with Jesus, discipleship is defined by following Jesus. Yet another difference between Jesus and the rabbis of his day is that rabbis were not known to minister to the community at large but were insular—for the most part only concerned with their disciples. Of course, Jesus *did* concern himself with a much broader community than just his Twelve; and taught them, and us, to do the same.

But *why* did they follow? Especially these first four, who signed on before Jesus made a name for himself. There they were, mending their nets, minding their own business and Jesus comes along and tells them to leave it all behind and follow him. Why would they throw down their nets, abandon their families and what little financial security they had, to follow Jesus? In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus performs the miracle of the unexpected catch—after a catch-less night of fishing, Jesus tells Peter where to drop his nets and it yields a huge catch. Surely that would be a pretty convincing reason to follow Jesus. But in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, there is no such miracle. There is no indication of why the disciples followed Jesus. All Jesus said was, "follow me" and they did. There must have been something about Jesus. As we read in Isaiah, they must have "seen a great light" in the stranger from Nazareth.

So they left their fish nets and followed Jesus. They left their fishing boats and took up fishing for people, learning from Jesus, telling others about the “great light” they had seen in Jesus. Jesus called them in pairs, they ministered together as a community: teams of two, a team of Twelve, a community of untold numbers. Like the fishing industry they left behind, following Jesus—doing ministry in his name—is not done alone but as a team.

When Jesus calls us to follow him, what is he calling us to do? Of course, we’re all here this morning. So we’ve answered the call of Jesus, at least in part. But are we fully committed? What “nets” is he calling us to leave behind to fish for people? As individuals, we all have our personal “nets”—the things that separate us from realizing the Reign of God that Jesus offers. We all have nets—activities, behaviors, pursuits, concerns that occupy our hearts and minds in ways that perhaps prevent us from truly knowing God and helping others know the Good News. Have we left the nets behind, or did we just leave them at home, to return to in a few hours?

It’s easier, isn’t it, to mind our own business, to mend our nets than to follow Jesus. Following Jesus, becoming a fisher for people, requires big life changes for a person and a church. We can’t just mind our own business and expect others to come to us. As a church, are we doing all we can to become fishers for people? Are we leaving our nets behind, listening for the Spirit and following where we are led, or are we expecting others to “come be like us.” For that matter, *how* do we become fishers for people?

As we follow Jesus, spreading the Good News of the Gospel, what “net” do we possess as fishers for people? What tool is so compelling that others will want to join in? It is that same “great light” about which Isaiah spoke. The same “great light” the disciples saw in the stranger from Nazareth. It is the light that only exists in Christian community.

Rev. Carol Howard Merritt, a Presbyterian pastor in Washington, DC, refers to this community as a “tribe.” She writes that she uses the term “tribe” because it “strikes a chord with me...although I’m married and have a child. Away from my family of origin, I long for community. As a pastor, I see that the best work of our church springs up when these groups begin to form: small, cohesive parties who can depend on each other for interesting friendships, pet sitting, and meaningful holidays.”²

Remember the sitcom *Friends*? It was an enormously popular show about six buddies in the late 20s (then early 30s) in New York City. I went through a stage when I was hooked on the show in syndication. Why were people so drawn

² Carol Merritt Howard, *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation*

to this TV show? Why did I watch it whenever I got the chance? I once heard a woman on the radio say that she can't go to sleep without watching at least one episode of the show, and takes DVDs with her when she travels. In college my friend Alex managed to arrange her schedule to leave Thursday nights open to watch the show. I remember her saying that after college, she hoped to have similar set-up: a small, close-knit group of friends, living together, hanging out together. What Alex yearned for...was community. What she wanted...was a tribe. And she's not alone. People *want* community. People *need* community.

But where are those people this morning? There are countless people who do not attend church but consider themselves Christian. There are way more people who claim to believe in Christ, believe in God, or call themselves "spiritual but not religious," than our church pews can know. How do we fish for these people? What are they *doing* on Sunday morning? What are they doing *right now*? They're at the coffee shop, they're skiing, they're at the grocery store, they're sleeping in after a night of fun or a hard week at work. Some of them *are* at work.

As a church, we can't compete with any of those things on their own grounds. No matter how great fellowship hour is, it's not the same as Starbucks. No matter how great our choir, it's not a dance club. And I'm the first to admit, I love coffee shops and sleeping in is...really nice. But we *do* have something to offer that those activities don't have: community. And not only community, but intergenerational community. Where other than church can you develop relationships with people from all generations, age 1 to 101? Where other than church can you learn from people of all generations? Where other than church can you *share your life* with people from all generations?

Jesus calls us *all* to be fishers for people. Christian community is our net, our tool of the trade. Christian community is a vital aspect of the Reign of God which Jesus offers. As we reflect on our annual report, on all that we do for this community in the community, let us also reflect on how we can increase our sense of community in our churches? How do we let others know about it beyond the church walls? Go Fish!