

Following and Fishing

Matthew 4:12-22: *Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.*

He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—as the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death —light has dawned. From that time, Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Our text from Matthew today starts out with some pretty bad news. John the Baptist has been arrested. Matthew’s Gospel doesn’t tell us why, but we learn in the other Gospels that John the Baptist got in trouble for speaking his truth to the political leader, King Herod. The king didn’t like it. There was no freedom of speech in that part of the world back then. John’s words made the king mad, so he arrested John. You will recall that John the Baptist had inaugurated Jesus’ ministry by baptizing him in the Jordan River. We read about that at the end of Matthew 3. Right after that, Jesus went into the wilderness to prepare for his ministry. When Jesus returned, he got this very bad news.

So now that John is in prison, what is Jesus to do? In many ways in this text we get the feeling of a baton being passed. This bad news means that Jesus is now on his own. Kind of like the baton was passed from

President Obama to President Trump this past Friday, so the baton of proclaiming the Kingdom of God is being passed from John the Baptist to Jesus here.

And the first thing Jesus does is go to Galilee. In the past, we have mentioned that when a biblical writer includes a detail, it is important for us to ask: Why? Why would Matthew want us to know that Jesus went to Galilee? The place where a leader begins things is important. That sometimes signals what the leader is about.

When President Obama announced his candidacy for president, he chose to do this not from his home in Chicago, but from Springfield, Illinois, the home of Abraham Lincoln. The unity Lincoln stood for, the coming full circle, if you will — of the Emancipation Proclamation all the way to a black man running for president. Obama was signaling he wanted to be this kind of president. Donald Trump announced his bid for the presidency from Trump Tower and emphasized that he is a business man and that getting business in order is to be a focus of his presidency. Billy Graham preached his first sermon at Bostick Lake Baptist Church in a small town in southern Florida. While he did not intentionally plan to preach his first sermon in this place, it is symbolic of his heart. Although he preached in big stadiums, Billy Graham's heart was for salvation for individual people, and he never lost this focus. Yes, oftentimes the places where leaders start reflect the emphasis of their work. And Matthew wants us to know that Jesus started in Galilee.

A Place, a Message for All People

Now, while Galilee was not a large place, it was a very diverse place. Because the land was so fertile there, many people from all over settled in Galilee. It was often called "Galilee of the Gentiles." Galilee was the kind of place where, if you were at the market, you could see people of every political and religious persuasion. In our day it would be like going to a mall or out somewhere in public and seeing blacks, whites, Indians and Chinese, Jews, Christians, Muslims and more. And this was a region where people from the ancient tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali settled as well.

I know: You never heard of them. Me neither. I think that is part of the point here. Jesus started his ministry in an out-of-the way place of great diversity, indicating that his message would be for all people — even those forgotten people we have never heard of!

Also, this place was most likely out of Jesus' comfort zone. He had been raised in Nazareth, with his own kind of people — small-town Jews. But he goes off to Galilee, breaking out of his own "tribe," if you will, to bring this message to not just his own, but all people. It might be like a person from Benton Harbor starting their ministry in Stevensville, or a Republican conservative from St. Joseph starting their ministry in a Democratic group of Puerto Ricans somewhere, or something like that. Jesus leaves his tribe; not that there were not Jews in Galilee, because there were.

So Jesus started in a certain "place." In this Galilee.

And in this place he calls some men to follow him. To carry this baton with him to preach the coming of God's Kingdom into the world. And oh, how I would love to go into a long talk about the "Kingdom of God" that Jesus is proclaiming here and how all were invited to turn from the ways of the world to enter into his Kingdom of love. But that is another sermon for another day. So often, Bible texts like this are like a box of incredible chocolates. We have to choose which we are going to eat. We will leave the "kingdom" chocolate for another day .

So, in this certain place, this diverse Galilee, this place that surely stretched his own comfort, Jesus calls some men to follow him. Ordinary men. Not men with lots of education or money. Not men who really know what they are getting into; but, truth be told, we often never really know what we are getting into when we say yes to God. These were men who got up that morning to earn a living for their families and, before the end of the day, their lives had taken a major turn. These were ordinary men. Fishermen.

And he says, follow me and I will make you fish for people. Oh, how I love that line, "I will make you fish for people" Because, it's all about people!

Jesus Calls to Us Deep Inside

And these men follow. They sense something is going on. They recognize this call as connected to something deep inside. Jesus doesn't call these men primarily into a movement, though in following Jesus a movement is created. He doesn't tell them he wants them to join him in overturning the Roman Empire. He calls them to follow him and help him "fish for people."

Jesus doesn't call these men to start a church or a nonprofit organization, though churches and

nonprofits surely have sprung up from Christ's followers. He doesn't tell them to create an institution that will last for two years or two decades or even two millennia or more. He calls them and says, "Follow me and help me fish for people."

The emphasis in both Jesus' choice of place to start his ministry and in the specific call to his first disciples is people. To persons.

I love the quote from our new General Assembly co-moderator, T. Denise Anderson, whom Daniel met at the General Assembly this past summer. In her commentary on this passage in *The Christian Century* magazine, she emphasizes that while we are surely called to stand up against evil and all its institutional manifestations, we must remember that the crux of the Gospel is about people. It is people who are the goal. It is people whom God prizes. It is people whom God pursues.

And if Jesus' ministry tells us anything, it is that God is constantly reaching for all people. God's love is for all people — indeed, all of us. No sin, no behavior, no opinion is beyond the reach of God to redeem. And all people of every color and every nation are loved by God. Republicans, Democrats, Christians, Muslims and others are loved by God. God's love is for ALL people. It is people who are the goal. People whom God prizes. People whom God pursues. The welfare of people. The souls of people. The lives of people. People are more important than our groups, our ideologies, our platforms. It's about God; it's about following Jesus; it's about people.

Follow and Fish

And let's be honest. Sometimes when people disagree with us or think differently than we do, we would rather have it be about our platform and our beliefs than about people. There's a fine we are called to walk. We talked about that last week: loving people who are different while also standing up for our values and fighting for justice. Maybe that's why Jesus calls the men to follow him. Jesus will show them the way.

So Jesus called his disciples to follow him and to fish for people. Now we know that "people" are the goal here. But what are we called to do. What are the verbs here?

The verbs are "follow" and "fish."

Jesus invited these men to drop everything and follow ... and fish.

No matter who is president, no matter what is happening in our country or world, my call, too — our call — is to follow Jesus and fish for people.

What does that mean? Let's ponder that a bit.

First, "follow." Another way this word could be translated in the Greek is "come!" Come on, people, come this way! Aren't we always struck by how these men so easily just left what they were doing, left their jobs and their families to follow Jesus. Come on, Jesus says, we are going to love this world, heal this world, share the good news that God's love and justice are for all.

Somehow, amid all the voices of the world, these men were able to hear his voice. Have you ever had that feeling that you just know you have to do something? Mother Teresa just knew she needed to help make sure poor people didn't die alone. Virginia Byers knows she needs to make a salad every week for our Thursday Night Supper. Some of my women friends just knew they needed to be at this march in Washington yesterday. I know an older woman who can't get out and do things like she used to, but she gets up and prays and sometimes writes letters to people.

Sometimes we just know. If we listen, we can hear the voice telling us deep within. And sometimes the voice makes no sense, and we surely don't know where it will lead. But we know. We just know. We must go. We must follow.

And if we are unsure, we can always test this deep sense by seeing if the voice is calling us to "love." Following Jesus always means following the way of love. Love most often invites us into the Galilees of our lives, too, those people and places we don't understand or maybe even don't want to understand.

And so, in this time of political change in our country, we are invite, once again to follow Jesus. Follow the way of love. Listen for the voice of love deep within that is calling us. Listen for the voice of love that might be inviting us to befriend someone very different than us. Following Jesus means following the ways of love and peace.

Many Ways to Fish

And when we follow Jesus, we will focus on people and become fishers of people. We will learn to “fish.” The men fished for a living, so they knew how to fish. How to throw out nets. How to put bait on the end of hook and seek to attract the fish. Jesus was letting them know that the skills they had in being fishermen were the skills they could use in following him.

That always gives me hope. The skills any of us has — cooking, cleaning, writing, accounting, parenting, art, keeping records or typing something, talking with someone, teaching someone how to read, and more — Jesus can use as we follow him. Sometimes people tell me that they feel like their work doesn’t have meaning or that they put their energy into things that don’t matter at work. But all work is done in relationships and all work can be used to follow Jesus.

And the goal, in whatever skill we have, is always to reach people — so that people can know God’s love.

I’ve only been fishing a few times. But one thing that has often struck me about fishing is the “waiting time.” You put the bait on the hook and then you wait. You can’t force a fish to bite. The fish comes in its own good time. Some fish will never bite.

So it is with people. We can put love on the hook. Put our love out there. Share God’s love the best we know. Some people will come, and some won’t. Our job is to be faithful in the loving. That’s what “fishing for people” is all about. It is about faithfully loving.

Now, my brothers and sisters, this all must start right here. There are times in the past year when I have been overwhelmed by what is going on nationally — the divisiveness in this country, the pain in the election, so many things. We all have been.

This text in Matthew gives us hope and direction. Because we can follow Jesus the best we know today. And we can put love out there for the people we come across each day. Something someone said in the Martin Luther King Jr. community service in Benton Harbor on Monday night made me think that I am called to share love with each person I meet. To try to listen for a person’s story today. To enter a kind of Galilee in my world and learn something and love there. To take the time to say “Hi” to the person who

rings up my groceries at Meijer and pray “love” on her. To take time to talk to one of the people who comes to our food pantry and pray “love” on her. To take time to thank the nurse’s aide at the hospital who is helping our loved one and pray “love” on him or her. To not think that people who come into my path are there by accident — but that maybe I am meant to share love with them and maybe they have some love to share with me. Following Jesus and the love.

That’s what we can do each day.

And let us be clear, in our nation the presidential baton was passed from Barack Obama to Donald Trump, but both Obama and Trump told us that this nation is about US. Because this is our country and our community and our church.

People, People, People

So, the baton is being passed to US today. Each of us. Let us always remember that the call is about people. Systems and platforms and programs and projects are all meant to serve PEOPLE. They are not ends in themselves.

So, as you go home and hang out with you family today, will you follow Jesus the best you know and take the time to love and understand your family members?

As you go back to work — to that job that has much meaning or to that job that bores you to death — will you follow Jesus the best you know and seek to love people?

As you seek to live with those you love who are struggling with health concerns, will you give yourself some grace, take a breath, follow Jesus the best you know and remember that love also means setting appropriate boundaries?

As you live with teenagers — and teenagers, as you live with parents — will you seek to follow Jesus the best you know? Seek to throw out lines of love and respect even though there are days when you don’t understand each other?

As we seek to live in a divided community and divided nation, will we seek to follow Jesus, go to places

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First Presbyterian Church of Benton Harbor, Michigan

Sermon Delivered Sunday, January 22, 2017

The Rev. Laurie Hartzell

that make us uncomfortable and seek to listen to those who are different than us and throw out lines of “love?”

Jesus is calling all of us today: “Come, follow me.” Listen deep within. I know you hear him.

He will love you more deeply than you can imagine — and he will make you fish for people.

Amen.