

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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Clarksburg, WV

Matthew 4:13-23

And (Jesus) said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

(Matthew 4:19 N.R.S.V.)

I Like Jesus, But . . .

What do you do if you are attracted to a certain way of life, but find some parts of it difficult? I was reading about some of our young people who claim to be vegetarians, but who still eat some meat. One young man said that he still allowed himself to eat fish. He said, "I don't eat anything that blinks." So I guess fish don't need to blink their eyes, so they were all right to eat. A young woman claims that she is a vegetarian but she really likes bacon. So she eats bacon. She eats bacon because she likes it, not other explanation given. Apparently there is a new name for this kind of people. They are called Flexitarians.

There are a lot of people in our society who claim to be Christians, but who don't want to engage in the kind of disciplined work that requires. One preacher said that it was the difference between fans and players. Fans sit and watch while the players do all the work. Fans are attracted to the game but don't want to engage in the committed kind of discipline and practice that it takes to be a player.

Perhaps we need to stretch that metaphor a bit because not everyone has the talent and coordination to play sports. But everyone has the ability to become a follower of Jesus, because he gives us the ability.

So there are a lot of people in our society who are glad to be fans of Jesus, but don't want to be followers. They like Jesus, but don't ask them to actually love the unlovable, feed the hungry, visit the sick, or witness to others. They like Jesus, but . . . they would rather do it as fans not followers.

In our gospel lesson Jesus begins his earthly ministry. Notice that the first thing that he does is ask others to help him. It is a big job, this proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and Jesus invites others to help him right from the start.

Jesus says to the fishermen Peter and Andrew, "Follow me . . ." Notice that he didn't say "like me," or "admire me," he said, "Follow me." If I could go back to the sports metaphor for just a moment, part of what makes a great college coach is recruiting. Every coach wants to recruit the best and the brightest. And after a coach makes a name for himself, recruitment becomes much

easier. Aspiring high school basketball players in West Virginia want to play for coach Huggins at WVU because he is successful. So many of the brightest and the best flock to him.

Jesus however, does not pick his followers from among the best and the brightest. His first disciples were common fisherman. Neither Peter nor Andrew was well educated, smooth talking, or highly intellectual. The gospels are clear that even after being with Jesus for three years they were still doing foolish things and asking silly questions. They just didn't get it.

Personally I have found some relief in the slowness of the first disciples. If even those who had the advantage of walking daily with Jesus had trouble, maybe there is hope for someone like me.

Jesus continues today to call ordinary people and to equip us with his power so that we can do extraordinary things. It is not that we are so great. It is that we serve a great God!

Jesus says to the first disciples, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." It all starts with a call to follow Jesus and to learn from him. When Jesus finishes his work on earth and ascends into heaven, these first disciples must carry on his work. But in the meantime, Jesus is going to equip them for this service.

All of us modern disciples that are here this morning are here because Jesus has called us to come follow him. It is not an accident that you are here this morning. It is not a coincidence. You are here because Jesus has called you to follow him.

Most of us need a lot of equipping, a lot of work.

There is a funny story about the mother of some young children who was tired of her mother-in-law constantly telling her how to raise her children. Finally the mother said to her mother-in-law. You know, you really need to stop telling me how to raise my children. I've got one of yours, and let me tell you, he needs a lot of work!

We are here this morning because God has called us and because we need a lot of work. Being a true follower of Christ is hard, and we need all the help we can get.

Now I want to jump ahead a little bit and point out that these same ordinary individuals who were called to be disciples would become in time apostles. A disciple is a student, one who learns. An apostle is one who is sent out. So we are called to come in and learn. Then we are sent out to bring others back in.

We are sent out to witness, to love the unlovable, to feed the hungry, and to invite others to meet Jesus. The church does not exist for itself. It exists to introduce others to Jesus Christ so that they too can become followers.

When Jesus calls his first disciples, he promises that he will equip them to become fishers for people. That is our calling too. We are to be fishers for people.

Now I know that is a scary thought. Presbyterians are not known for our ability to introduce others to Christ. Yet that is indeed our calling.

So listen, what do you think happens in a church where people are afraid to invite others to come with them to church? If left unchecked, that fear usually leads people to focus only on what is happening inside the church. That internal focus then makes it harder for visitors to get in.

One preacher tells a story about how he had agreed to be the guest preacher in a certain church. On the morning in which he was supposed to preach, he arrived early and couldn't figure out how to get into the church building. He knew he was supposed to meet with the worship leader in the pastor's office, but he had no idea how to get there. He circled the building trying different doors and finding each of them locked.

Eventually he did find the right door and all was fine. It is telling however that the people of the church were so unused to visitors that they didn't tell their guest how to get into the building. After all, all of the people who went to church there knew exactly what to do. They were not prepared for visitors.

This same preacher tells about preaching at a church that was growing in membership. There were lots of signs and greeters posted to help him find where he was to go. The worship service was upbeat and exciting. But what really stood out for him was that at the end of the service the pastor shouted, "Go out into the world and remember our mission. Our mission is," and the pastor paused, and the congregation shouted back, "fishin'" Our mission is fishin'!

We all need to be reminded of that. We are not here just for ourselves. "Our mission is fishin'."

It is also worth remembering that fishing is not about making big scary splashes in the water, or trying to corner the fish. Fishing is about patience, practice, and a good strategy. You are not trying to argue or batter people into coming to church. You are paying attention to people, inviting them, and going the extra mile.

Later on the pastor of this bustling church was asked, "Who is your best fisher?" And the pastor said that would be George. It turns out that George owns the best car repair shop in town. When his customers come to have their car fixed, George asks them if they are going to church. If they say no, he tells them what he likes about his church and offers to come pick them up and take them to church the following Sunday. Many people say, no, but some say yes. Strategy, practice, patience.

Our mission is fishin'. As we go to prayer, take a moment to ask God to reveal to you what strategy he is equipping you to use in your fishing. Then ask God's help to practice your fishing with patience and with love.

Amen.