

# “Followers”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 25, 2009*

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany

Psalm 62:5-12

Rev. John Wahl

Mark 1:14-20

Sometimes it is not easy to make the necessary transition in our minds from a text in scripture written two thousand years ago, half-way around the world, to our lives in the here and now. Even the things we think we know have changed so dramatically over passing of time and the change of situation that we must imagine the recreation of another era and culture before we apply it to our own.

When Jesus calls his first disciples, he acts as the sole catalyst and his voice is the only one recorded. When Jesus declares that now they shall become fishers of people, their new vocation is anchored in the fact that Jesus has fished for them: Jesus is the fisher and they are the netted fish. In those days, no rods and reels were used in fishing – no “bait” or “lures” or sonar depth-finders – but only a simple net thrown overboard.

But as we hear with the call to James and John, the sons of Zebedee, fishing involves more than the act of casting the nets into the water and pulling in the haul. There are also the preparations: the mending of the nets, the repairing of the tools that are bound to become damaged and worn over time.<sup>1</sup> And so it is with people-fishers: not only called and sent out, but also cared for and equipped; intended by Christ to have periodic respite and ongoing support.

When Jesus calls these earliest disciples, who were, by vocation, fishermen, he tells them that from now on, they have been given a new job, a new purpose: they will become fishers of women and men. To us, their transition appears so simple and absolute: one day they were fishermen, but upon hearing Jesus’ invitation, they drop their nets, leave their boats and families behind, and immediately embark on the journey of their new vocation. This was not intended to simply be another activity – one more task – to add to their busy calendars, but a new identity; a new way of living.

For much of my childhood, my Uncle Howard was my oldest living relative. He was a skilled tradesman: a life-long member of the Plumber’s Union who not only fixed leaky faucets in people’s homes but worked on many of the largest building projects in town. Although well past the allowable age, he was one of those people who never really retired; always taking on an odd job here or there, tinkering in one place or another.

---

<sup>1</sup> Elton Brown in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1

And still, there was no question that my Uncle Howard's true passion was fishing. No matter what the time of year, no matter what might be going on in his life, he could be seen driving around town with a fishing boat tied on top of his car: a simple, aluminum row-boat that he could still lift on and off well into his eighties. Whenever he had free time and there was a lake or pond nearby, he would pull over, bring the boat down, and set it afloat. Often, the mere presence of the boat served as a conversation-starter and a link with friends and strangers alike, who would surely receive the invitation to go out fishing with him.

These days, you see people driving around not with a fishing boat tied to the top of their car but instead with a fish attached to the back of their car: an ancient symbol for those who follow Christ which signifies they have embraced Jesus' invitation to come and follow and become people-fishers. Still, the presence of a fish on a car does not mean that the person driving the vehicle is actually a disciple. It could be that a family or church member convinced them to put it on. Maybe they want to be known as a Christian, but don't really think that they have the time or talents to be people-fishers themselves. It could be that they do not want to push their beliefs on others: believing it is not right to "bait" or "lure" others into something they really haven't chosen.

Even for those among us who might choose to put a fish on the back of our cars – or for those of us who don't but display other signs that we are church-goers and faithful disciples – most of us are reluctant to be people-fishers. We are afraid: not just of being intrusive among others, not just that we might not have the gifts required to share our faith with others, and not just because others judge that the faith we have to share is not as pure as Christianity could or should be. Fear is also about giving up some of what we have or what we are; about having to give up control over our plans, our comfort, our future.

You – the members of the congregation – might look at these examples of call to action and listen as pastors relay to you accounts of being called into Christ's service and logically assume that few people are called by God. You may think that a spiritual vocation must come with a professional title: like minister or missionary.

But, there is not one person in this church community who has not been called by God. Each of us is known by God; each of us has been called by God according to specific needs and unique gifts. Jesus assures us that God will supply everything we need to fulfill our callings. And when we fulfill the call and carry out our individual and corporate mission, not only will it be good for others, but it will be good for us as well.

Ministers are not the only persons in the church who have specific callings from God. Instead, we – the clergy – are privileged to watch the process of call and response take place over and over as people recognize and embrace the ways they have been invited out of the boat. To name a few, there are:

- Calls to work specifically with youth or preschoolers or older adults

- Calls to attend to the church's physical plant – brick and mortar, furnace and toilet
- Calls to work not only within the church community but outside its walls
- Calls to help with the finances of the church, its committees and its missions
- Calls to work with the hungry, the homeless and the environment
- Calls to be faithful students, teachers, nurses, lawyers and volunteers
- Calls to be good moms and dads and grandparents and neighbors

No matter our age or vocation, we are all known and beloved by God. We are all called by God to do specific tasks but also to adopt new identities – whether on a full-time, part-time or spare-time basis. Worry as we might, God will supply everything we need to fulfill our calling: the internal resources and external supplies. And when we live our calling by God, it will be good for us, and it will be good for the whole people of God.<sup>2</sup>

It can feel consuming, being in relationship with God: it requires so much more of our very selves than simply offering some sacrifice that is detached from us. And for all that it asks of us, our participation in God doesn't offer much in the way of earthly security, as Mark reminds us: this lection begins with a mention of the arrest of John the Baptist, who would soon meet his earthly end for having prepared the way for Christ's coming.

It's challenging at times to reconcile the seeming paradox that giving ourselves to a God of love and mercy does not always protect us from heartache and suffering; that in fact, it's sometimes just the opposite. Called as we are to engage the world, we find ourselves drawn more deeply into the pain and despair present there – along with (thank God) the delight. In each place Christ calls us to notice and to embody the presence and love of God: to be the living body of Christ, who spoke of himself as food, as life-giving sustenance.<sup>3</sup>

Discipleship – following God's call to action through Jesus Christ – begins not with our ambition to lead, nor with an assessment of our talents, but rather with a summons. As Jesus said in John's Gospel, "you did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." (John 15:16a)

In order to become bearers of that good and lasting fruit, we must attend not only to the active casting of the nets, but the preparation and mending of ourselves and one another. We are indeed called to be followers of Christ: to follow his lead to action, but also his lead to prayer, hospitality, conversation, travel, learning, table-gathering, visiting the sick and the lonely, and resting at the end of the day. If we see our purpose as fishers of people only to be casting the nets again and again, over time our tools will fall into disrepair, our energies will become depleted, and the strength of our unity and Christ-like compassion will fade away. And so, let us follow Christ – in all of the places he himself led his followers, and where we as followers are called to go.

---

<sup>2</sup> Kim Buchanon, "What's My Life?"

<sup>3</sup> Jan Richardson, "Hooked" from *The Painted Prayerbook*

Keep listening, because God calls each of us, time and again, to small tasks as well as large, but always to become someone new. God calls us sometimes to strange places and other times to the familiar, but always as a follower of Christ. And in the hearing and obeying of these summons, God is revealed to us: uncovered, peeled away; if only we will follow. AMEN.