

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 4:12-23

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—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. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Today's story takes place at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. Prior to this, we read about the groundwork his relative John laid before Jesus began his ministry. He called the people to repentance, and he baptized them into newness of life. He announced that one was coming who was greater than he—one whose sandals he was not even worthy to carry. Eventually, Jesus came to be baptized by John, and John knew he was the Chosen One.

We learn then that Jesus was led into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan. He successfully rose above those temptations and moved on to get to work on his mission for God. Upon hearing that John the Baptist had been thrown in prison, putting an end to John's ministry, Jesus withdrew to Galilee. He did not go to some holy place or to some religious center. Instead, he withdrew eventually to Galilee, heathen Galilee, Galilee of the Gentiles, a place where, according to Jewish belief, pure faith had been distorted.

While there he makes a stop in his hometown of Nazareth where he is rejected and driven out of town. From there he went and lived along the Sea of Galilee in Capernaum. This was no quiet fishing town. Capernaum was a lively city. Commercial fishing amounted to big business there. From among the fishermen in that city, Jesus called his first disciples. But before we get to that, let's take a moment to think about what it was like to be a fisherman at that time.

It was not anything like my days of going fishing. I remember my dad taking me fishing when I was a kid. He had a friend who owned a boat. We would go camping on the weekend at a campground along the Chesapeake; and we'd take the boat out on the bay to go fishing. I was never very good at fishing, but I thought it was fun. I didn't mind putting the bait, worms, or chicken on the hook. I remember catching perch, catfish and eels. We always threw the eels back. I did not like taking the fish off the hooks, so Dad or his friend always did it. They also cleaned the fish. I was probably spared that task because I was a child.

Fishing for us was like a game, something fun to do; and if the catch was good, we had some delicious fresh fish to eat. There are many people who fish for enjoyment. Some of the challenges of fishing for the common sportsman are purchasing and preparing the proper equipment, finding the good places to fish, having patience to catch something and not getting

too discouraged when one doesn't. There are probably other challenges that I am not aware of, but many people don't mind the challenges. The rewards of the catch, the change from day-to-day routine and scenery, and the moments for relaxation override the challenges.

Making a living fishing is quite a bit more challenging. It certainly was in Jesus' day. In today's scripture reading, when Jesus called Peter and Andrew, they were casting their nets into the water. It took a lot of strength to cast the nets AND to pull them in, especially if the nets were full of fish. James and John weren't fishing when Jesus came by; they were mending their nets. This had to be done often, given the kind of nets they used. Fishing was definitely hard work.

So, Jesus came along and made them an offer to drop their nets and follow him. Matthew tells us that at once they dropped their nets and followed Jesus. We might wonder what they were thinking in those moments. Matthew doesn't say anything about whether they knew anything of Jesus; but John tells us in his gospel, 1:35-42, that Jesus had talked to Peter and Andrew while he was preaching in the area. We actually reflected on that text last Sunday.

One has to wonder though, if they truly understood what it meant to go fishing for people. Perhaps they thought it had to be easier than what they were doing as fishermen. If so, they were in for a big surprise.

We've already noted that Jesus was in a heathen city, but it's also important to note, that Jesus did not go to the temple to seek out learned scholars or public officials. He didn't look for people with clout in the community. No, he went right to near the bottom of society's ladder to call out people to go "fishing" with him. But they were men with connections to everyday people in the community.

Right away we already should be hearing messages meant for us. Jesus does not go to some perfect place to seek out his disciples. He calls people out from the church, which as we all know or should know, are filled with imperfect people. That's certainly why we are here, worshiping a perfect God, seeking forgiveness, building a supporting and learning community, and getting our spirits fed with the Word so we can go out and face the world as God's beloved children. And let's remember that Jesus calls people from their everyday existence too.

He does not necessarily call people who are authorities on scripture or who are naturally gifted speakers. Jesus calls out people to follow him who still have a lot to learn about the Word and even about themselves. Jesus knows the strengths and weaknesses of all whom he calls. He knows their talents, sometimes before they are even aware of them. He knows their potential for helping to build God's Kingdom, filling it with faithful, forgiven, worshiping, and serving God-loving people. Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves.

That may be so, but—Ah, there it is—the "but" thoughts and anxieties that hold people back from following Jesus. These four men we read about today dropped everything and followed Jesus. James and John left their father Zebedee sitting in the boat, probably with their unfinished work. They left their dad to take care of the family business. I wonder what Zebedee thought about that. We don't know.

Peter, Andrew, James and John left everything behind and stepped out into the unknown. If they had any thoughts that whatever Jesus wanted them to do had to be easier than fishing, they would soon discover they were wrong.

Let's be clear: following Jesus does not mean everyone is going to need to leave their job for something new. Not everyone needs to pick up and relocate, or even leave their family behind. But we do leave behind the old self—at least the things from the old self that hold us to the fallen ways and thoughts of the world. Our new focus is Jesus. Focusing on him we receive the spiritual nourishment we need to follow in his footsteps. Encouraged by his confidence in us,

AND through the empowerment we receive from the Holy Spirit—something the early disciples were not aware of at that time—we can step out to answer the call.

The disciples not only left things behind, but they also ventured out into uncharted waters. In verse 23 we are told they followed Jesus throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness of the people brought to Jesus. The news about Jesus spread all over Syria and people with all kinds of ailments and demon possession were brought to him for healing.

In verse 25 we read, "Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him." This too is significant for us to remember. These four men following Jesus meant going to places and engaging with people—something the Jewish authorities discouraged. Dare I even say, forbid.

For example, The Decapolis was a league of ten cities east of the Sea of Galilee, joined together for better trade and mutual defense. This was Gentile territory. Jews did not belong there. Even when the Gentiles came to Jesus wherever he was, they were instructed to avoid them. The message propagated by the Jewish authorities was that the Gentiles were outsiders and even evil because they were not the chosen children of God and they were to be treated as such. These were people who did not understand what faith in God meant—likely because it had not been shared with them.

So as the disciples followed Jesus, can you imagine the tapes playing in their thoughts reminding them of lessons drilled into them by the Jewish authorities to avoid all of the Gentiles? It must have caused at least some anxiety—if not major anxiety. What if people saw them going to these forbidden places and reaching out to the unclean heathens? What would people think? How would they be treated for doing this?

But Jesus came to bring about change. This is exactly where Jesus and his disciples needed to be and with whom they needed to be, sharing a new message, a radical message, a message of love and acceptance, grace and forgiveness grounded in the truth of God's will. They were learning right from the get-go that this was going to be a key component of their ministry. We know that this radical movement was going to change countless lives.

I'm not sure that the disciples had any idea that they were getting into something so radically different from what the Jewish leaders were promoting. Maybe at first they were just along for the ride, but they got more and more involved in the work of the mission as they followed and learned from Jesus.

Likewise, for us, when we say yes to following Jesus, we may have no idea what will be asked of us, where we will be asked to go, what we may be asked to do. We don't know what others will think about us if we go against the norms of social thoughts and pressures. Will we be rejected by them, which would hurt if they did? We want to be liked and accepted by others. All of these things can make many of us feel uncomfortable. We might, silently, question whether following Jesus is worth it although we would never say that because we want Jesus in our lives. We like to know upfront exactly what we are getting into if we say yes to doing something.

Adding to our dilemma, we have a much greater awareness than the disciples did in Jesus' day about the threats of violence and crime in our communities. That justifiably creates fear in us. Social pressures and prejudices tagged to this reality get drilled into our heads, influencing our thoughts and emotions and establishing reasons for discomfort in engaging with certain people, especially at certain places.

That doesn't erase the fact that we know the message of Jesus is still radical. We know the Good News of Jesus is intended for everyone, and we know there are far too many people

who have not heard the message and they do not know Jesus. The radical message of Jesus confronts the self-centered, materialistic and foolish messages of our culture.

Knowing this and doing something about it is our responsibility as Christians. Not all of us will be asked to go and do things that severely challenge us; but when we choose to let Jesus into our lives, we are all called to go "fishing" for people. Just as living requires that we breathe, to follow Christ is to engage in mission.

What the Christian is to do, what you and I are to do, is disarmingly simple. We are to follow Jesus. We are to put our faith in God, to trust Jesus and the Holy Spirit to guide us and empower us for the task we are called to do. We need to get out-of-the way of ourselves and stop over-analyzing, stop making excuses for why we can't or should not follow Jesus. Instead, we should fall to our knees in prayer, listen for discernment and take the first step to move in the direction for where and how Jesus is leading us. When we are in partnership with Jesus, we are never alone to fulfill the role of discipleship. This releases us from a great many burdens.

One thing a carpenter learns quickly is how to drive nails. He hammers hundreds of nails a day, and that's a lot of practice! The most important thing in hammering nails is to keep your eye on the nail, not on the thumb that's holding the nail. That is because you will always hit what you watch! If Jesus is your "spiritual" nail, what are the "thumbs" you keep hitting?

Jesus says to us, "Come follow me and I will make you fishers of people." Some of us have boldly stepped out and are following him. Some may be selective in where and how they will follow him. Others are still "thinking about it." If the last two possibilities are the struggle you face, it may be time to ask yourself, what are the thumbs you keep hitting that hold you back from following him?

May we all accept the invitation from Jesus to go fishing. It won't be easy, but we have an excellent teacher and leader. We even have the Holy Spirit to help us. Do you believe that? If so then, let's go fishing! Amen.