

## Fish Stories

Mark 1:14-20

January 25, 2009

An old-timer was sitting on the bank of a river one day with a pole in the water. He was obviously waiting on a nibble. Fishing season hadn't officially opened yet however.

A uniformed officer stood quietly behind him for a few minutes. Finally, the old-timer asked, "You the game warden?"

"Yup," was the officer's response.

The officer's response didn't appear to ruffle the old-timer. He just began to move the fishing pole from side to side. Finally, he lifted the line out of the water and pointed to the minnow on the end of his line and said, "Just teaching him how to swim."<sup>1</sup>

We're dealing with a couple of fishing stories this morning. The one is the intended to be humorous story about Jonah and a whale. It's not supposed to be taken literally. That's not the same as saying it's not to be taken serious. It's just that it is a form of writing whose style is one communicating something important with humor. It's a comedy, pure and simple, with a very important message about what happens when God starts putting into people's heads or hearts ideas of something that needs to be done and the idea that the person on whose heart or mind the idea has been laid is the one who is do something about it.<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel account is the story, according to the author of Mark, of what went down when Jesus chose his first four disciples. "It's about the first people who were called to hold the job which we hold today."<sup>3</sup>

John the Baptist got arrested one day, and soon after Jesus got his show on the road in Galilee. He did it by proclaiming the good news of God – that the kingdom was near and that everyone should turn their lives around – repent – and believe the good news.

As Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee he saw several men fishing – two sets of brothers – Simon and Andrew and the two sons of Zebedee, James and John. And he called them. He said to Simon and Andrew, "Come, follow me and I'll transform the skills you use for fishing into skills that will help you fish for people." And they did it. Simon and Andrew left their nets and followed him. James and John didn't delay either when he called them. They even left their father with only hired hands.

People who fished for a living in Jesus' day weren't well-to-do. They weren't well-educated. Their social life wasn't very culturally refined. They were, well, common folk if you will - ordinary people. Perhaps Jesus saw in them some things he felt he could build on – he could make use of in his ministry. People who fished for a living after all had to be physically and emotionally and mentally tough – they had to have patience – they had to be committed – had to be persistent – had to know their surroundings – had to know the sea – had to understand the ways of fish. Jesus may have thought, "Now, there are some guys with some qualities I could use when it comes to catching others. There are some people with the skills, the personalities I believe would make them be good disciples, good followers."

Now, I really don't know why Jesus called four fishermen to be his first followers. The things I just mentioned might really be some of the reasons. They're certainly good reasons if you want to make sense out of who God

calls and why God calls certain people. But, I'd like to suggest to you this morning that what we need to get from this little story of Jesus calling four fishermen is the same one that is present in so many other call stories in the bible. What we need to keep in mind is that God calls who God wants to do what God wants and God does the equipping for that which God needs and wants to get done. Most people who feel the call of God on their life feel unprepared, ill-equipped, vulnerable and dependent on God to see them through. The church is made up of ordinary people, called by God and gifted by God, to do extraordinary things. The Christian journey of faith is about God calling, gifting ordinary people, you and me, to do extraordinary ministry in the world.

I've used this quote many times before and I will many times in the future because I believe it is so formative to the journey of faith we are all on. In her book *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*, Elizabeth O'Connor wrote: "Time was when I thought that the all-important subject was gifts, and that, if we could identify our gifts, and begin using them, our lives would burst with creativity and the world would be restored. Now I am not so sure. A talent may be so great that it propels a person forever down one path, as is the case with some artists. A writer can produce advertising copy, history, propaganda, poetry, contracts and proposals, political speeches, or sermons.

"If one day I should be called to bring into being a residential center for some of the city's homeless and some days I think this is my call – then I might never write again, not because writing had ceased to be an important gift or to make claims upon me, but because other gifts more needed in the fulfillment of the new call would be evoked and take precedence. To be deeply nurturing and to carry one's life into the future, the use of a gift must be related to what one is called to do."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus said to the four fishermen along the Sea of Galilee: "Follow me and I'll send you fishing for people in my name." Friends, we are all called people – all people God can and wants to use. Call comes from beyond us, outside us and yet we hear it, sense it, somewhere deep inside us. For some of us, call comes as a call to leave our nets, or our books, or our desks, or our homes, or the security of established careers. For the majority of us though, call comes as a call to mend our nets more carefully, read our books more thoroughly, mind our desks more faithfully, live in our homes more lovingly – in other words to be more conscious of the ministry God wants done right around us as we live our everyday lives.

"Hear the good news," says Jesus, "God's kingdom is here and God loves you, God forgives you, God believes in you and God will equip you to live life experiencing the greatest fishing high possible – that of connecting others up with the good news of God's kingdom. Come, follow me and I'll teach you to find the people I want you to bring to God and I'll equip you for the ministry I call you to do."

God calls every one of us in the midst of our daily living. All we have to do is spend some time reflecting on what's happening around us and in us and be open to what God might want to say to us through what's going on around us and in us.

Let me say one more thing about this fishing expedition we are all called to be involved in as persons who have said yes ourselves to being followers of Jesus: it happens out there and a church that forgets that is one that will soon die.

There was an article in a newspaper a while back about some pelicans in California. Pelicans are known for their fishing ability. These particular ones were hanging out near a fleet of fishing boats. The fishermen were just beginning to establish their business and so cleaned the fish as soon as they pulled their boats into the little

harbor and disposed of the fishing waste by simply throwing it into the water. The pelicans began to eat the leftovers and thus didn't ever have to leave the harbor to catch their daily supply of food.

Well, after awhile this new group of fishermen discovered that they could make some additional money by selling their fish waste and so they stopped throwing it into the harbor. The pelicans weren't prepared for this change and continued their daily wait for the easy food. As a result of the lack of adapting the pelicans grew thinner and thinner.

Wildlife officials were finally called in to see if they could determine what was causing the pelicans' loss of weight. It didn't take them long to conclude that the pelicans had forgotten how to fish. They solved the problem by relocating some pelicans from another area so that the starving pelicans could be taught how to fish again.<sup>5</sup>

Suppose there existed a fishing club where the members only sat around swapping fish stories of the time they landed a big one or about the whopper that got away. Suppose they never got into their boats or actually cast their lines into the water. Imagine a fishing club with members who were satisfied simply sitting around looking at the trophies on the wall but never actually went out fishing anymore. What kind of a fishing club would that be? One not long for this world, right?

Well, a lot of churches are guilty of such a reality. In Mickey Anders book *Go Fish* he observes: "They sit around bragging about the days when their boat was full of fresh fish. They look nostalgically to the days when the main purpose of their church was to go fishing, to reach others for Christ. But they never actually go fishing; they merely talk about going fishing."<sup>6</sup> And friends, that can never be what a church is about or it will die as well.

As our Invitation to Christian Discipleship this morning let me offer some tips we should keep in mind as we think about fishing for followers for Jesus Christ.

- a. Go where the fish are. Be with people on their own turf.
- b. Be real, be vulnerable, and be honest.
- c. Be creative. We don't have to do things the same old way.
- d. Be spiritual, but not "churchy".
- e. Be patient.
- f. Be ready for surprises!
- g. Be willing to step out of your comfort zone.
- h. Be on the lookout for where God is at work.
- i. Be praying.<sup>7</sup>

Let us pray.

1. Jacob M. Braude, Braude's Treasury of Humor (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 78.
2. "Fish Tales," SermonSuite.com.
3. "The Adventure of Discipleship," sermons.com.
4. Elizabeth O'Connor, Cry Pain, Cry Hope (Washington, D. C.: The Servant Leadership School, 1987), p. 79.
5. Gary Nicolosi
6. Mickey Anders, *Go Fish*
7. Laura A. Jacobus, *Forgetting How to Fish*