



"The Call of Discipleship"

Scripture – Mark 1:14-20

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, January 21, 2024

One of my favorite things about Westminster's sanctuary is the window above the balcony. Of course, I appreciate the vibrant hues and intricate details. It's a stunning piece. But the thing I love most is how the artist set Jesus, the Lord of the Cosmos, amidst ordinary folk, not *all* of whom are remembered for doing extraordinary things.

To Christ's left and right are early followers of Jesus — the first disciples to hear and proclaim the good news. In the arc above his head stand figures we'd find in history books — mostly church leaders, like Luther and Calvin. But Isaac Newton and Abraham Lincoln make an appearance, as well. And, along the outer edges, are regular people engaged in regular work: a mother cradling her infant and a physician listening to a child's heartbeat; a carpenter sawing lumber and a teacher at the chalkboard.

I love this window because it honors a variety of vocations. Whether serving as a disciple or a doctor, a mother or a missionary, a Presbyterian pastor or the President of the United States, these people are living out their callings as followers of Jesus Christ. Too often, we think of a "calling" as something reserved for people employed by the church. And while most pastors and mission personnel and church musicians could recite their Call Stories at the drop-of-a-hat, God's call is not limited to those whose business cards include the word "church." As our reading from the Gospel of Mark reminds us, we all share a common calling. Jesus the Christ calls *each* of us to participate in the kingdom of God.

Now, this is a familiar story; even had I not just re-read them, I imagine many of us could recite the words Jesus shouts from the lakeshore: *Follow me and I will make you fish for people!* But, according to the Gospel of Mark, this is not the *first* invitation Jesus voices as he walks alone the sea. Before approaching Simon and Andrew as they cast their net into the water, Jesus calls out to all with ears to hear: *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

There is a sense of urgency in these words — the first ones Jesus speaks in the entire gospel: *repent and believe!* There is something that drives those commanding words. I think it's more than eagerness

— the fact that Jesus has emerged from the wilderness after forty days and is itching to get started. No, something else has happened. We catch only a passing reference in today's text, though Mark will tell the story in full later on: John the Baptist has been arrested. Only two verses separate the baptism of Jesus from his arrival in Galilee, but — in the interim — John has been taken into custody.

This passing note alerts all of us to the setting of this narrative. The good news of Jesus Christ unfolds against a backdrop of *bad* news. While distressing, the report of John's arrest is not surprising. Because that is the way of the kingdoms of this world. Insecure tyrants like Herod will always stifle criticism and complaint. They have no qualms about oppressing ordinary people and putting prophets to death. Yes, the powers-that-be trade in trauma and fear-mongering. It is into *this* time and place that the Creator sends the Beloved Son to announce that the kingdom *of God* has come near. So, as soon as he arrives in Galilee, Jesus proclaims, "Repent, and believe in the good news."

We are quick to associate words like "Repent!" with fire and brimstone preaching — the kind of preaching that inspires more fear than faith. But the call to repent is, really, the call to turn ... to turn from things that do not serve God or God's purposes, and to turn toward the One who offers salvation. To turn away from the death-dealing kingdoms of this world toward a kingdom marked by healing and compassion and grace, a realm requiring self-giving service and liberating love. "Turn around, and believe in the good news," Jesus cries. This is the *first* call of Christ — to trust that, in and through Jesus, the kingdom of God is at hand.

But — though the time has been fulfilled — the realm of God is not fulfilled in an instant. This is the work of the Messiah's ministry — to heal the sick and feed the hungry, to release the captive and bring hope to the hopeless. And, in all these things, to show that God's reign is taking hold. Given the oppressive hand of Herod and the crushing heel of the Roman Empire, *this* is the urgent work of the Gospel. So, immediately, Jesus heads off to draw others into this holy work. As he walks along the shoreline, he sees two fishermen casting their net into the lake. So he calls out: *Follow me and I will make you fish for people!*

It's such a curious command: *Follow me and I will make you fish for people!* What, exactly, does that mean? If we take these words literally, following Jesus doesn't sound like a very high calling ... Are we supposed to trap unwitting souls and drag them, flailing and flopping, into our boats?

This — unfortunately — is *one* of the ways the church has historically interpreted this verse. As fishers of people, disciples were supposed to "win souls for Jesus" by bringing (or, even, coercing) others into the boat. No wonder, then, that disciples were so frequently depicted as fishermen and their boats adopted as symbols of the church itself — hence the sailing ships in that window. There is, of course, a problem with imagining new believers as a catch of fish. But, the fact that real fish die when they're gathered into the boat was of little consequence; it was understood as a metaphor for dying to the world so that one might gain eternal life in heaven.¹

¹See, for instance: Osvaldo Vena, "Commentary on Mark 1:14-20," workingpreacher.org.

This understanding of the Call of the Disciples inspired much evangelistic fervor throughout history, often to very harmful ends. That, in and of itself, should make us question this interpretation. The fact that this reading seems inconsistent with the witness of the Gospel should make us question it, too. Jesus does *not* go around telling people that the travails of their lives are of no matter because there is pie-in-the-sky in the sweet by and by. Rather, he enters fully into their present reality — beset as it is by bad news — and invites them to behold the kingdom of God in their midst.

So, the question remains: What does Jesus mean when he says, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people!”?

I wonder if the church has been fixated on the wrong thing ... What if discipleship is *not* about being “Fishers of People”? What if it’s *not* about the particular *task* to which Christ calls us? What if it is about letting our particular gifts and experiences shape our call?

Perhaps Jesus calls two fishermen to be Fishers of Men because it is the language they understand. Maybe he asks them, specifically, to fish for people because fishing is a job they know well. They’re uniquely suited to the work. While following the Messiah will require them to leave Galilee behind, Jesus is not asking them to leave *everything* behind. He’s not asking them to abandon who they are: their experience, their expertise. He’s asking these fishermen to use their particular gifts to participate in kingdom work.²

This, ultimately, is the call of discipleship: to join Jesus in the work of ushering in the kingdom of God. The call is to follow Jesus from the shores of Galilee to the places where suffering souls cry out for his care. To serve alongside him as he feeds the hungry and brings hope to the hopeless. To participate in his ministry of healing and compassion and grace, so that others might experience the kingdom of God unfolding in their midst.

There is no *one way* to participate in this work. There is no need to be ordained to a particular office, or to have the word “Minister” in our title. We simply need to follow Christ into the world, trusting that the Spirit uses our particular gifts to help usher in God’s realm.

There is still an urgency to this work. Now, as ever, the world is beset by bad news; the powers-that-be never cease to threaten and oppress and — too often — to silence voices that advocate for good. And — into this very time and place — the voice of Christ echoes, calling us to turn away from the death-dealing kingdoms of this world toward a kingdom marked by self-giving service and liberating love.

That call will take different forms to reflect the gifts and experiences different people bring to the task — whether it is the doctor who sets aside a hospital practice to serve the wounded in war-torn Gaza, or the faithful whose gifts for hospitality have met the challenge of welcoming busloads of immigrants dumped onto Chicago’s winter streets ...

²Thanks to Karoline Lewis, Joy J. Moore, and Matt Skinner for this insight. See: “Sermon Brainwave 944: Third Sunday after Epiphany — January 21, 2024,” workingpreacher.org.

There are many ways to answer Christ's call, as individuals and as a community of faith. Examples of how particular gifts are put to work can be lifted up from near and far. But, on this day when we commission the Guatemala Partnership Team, I give thanks for the particular ways our Guatemala ministry allows people to use their particular gifts to help usher in God's realm.

In Guatemala City there is a bakery that was started by six young adults under the guidance of one of our mission partners. This bakery is located in what's called a "red zone" — an area where the powers-that-be have taken the form of deeply-entrenched gangs, who keep the neighborhood mired in conflict. Given the high rates of poverty and drug-related crime, there is little opportunity for young people in Guatemalan red zones. But difficult circumstances have not squashed the hopes and dreams of the young adults at Utz Pan Bakery. With a grant from our denomination, they purchased an oven, work tables, a mixer and other items needed to launch their business. If you have ever given to the One Great Hour of Sharing Special Offering during the season of Lent, *you* have supported this project.

The Utz Pan Bakery is transforming the lives of these young people. In addition to earning income to pay for their education and help support their families, they are learning how to bake and run a business so that their futures are not defined by the circumstances of their birth. For some, this experience has already yielded opportunities these young adults never could have imagined.

A year ago the team we commissioned last January visited the Utz Pan Bakery; they listened to these young people's stories and learned from them how to make crescent rolls. Afterward, one of our members had an idea. Why not take these young adults, who'd had little experience of life beyond the red zone, to visit some of our other partners? You see, in the Western Highlands — about five hours from Guatemala City — there is a woman who started a bakery with seed money from the Association of Mam Christian Women for Development, whose projects we support. Over the years she has nurtured a thriving business, and has certainly learned the tricks of the trade. Which makes her particularly well-suited to share her experience and expertise with young people just learning how to run a bakery.

In November, that brilliant idea came to fruition. The young adults from the Utz Pan Bakery traveled away from the violence of the red zone to the serene beauty of the Western Highlands. There, they toured this well-established bakery and learned about the ins-and-outs of running the business. Some might call it a kingdom moment: partnering in possibility, multiplying the gifts offered, and imagining a different world to be realized.

This is the call of discipleship: to join Jesus in ushering in God's realm. There is no *one way* to participate in this work. We do so in large and small ways — by purchasing gloves for neighbors who are without shelter during these cold winter months or by preparing a meal for those in transitional housing. Perhaps by tutoring a child in math or sharing a lunch table with a lonely peer. Maybe you participate by supporting programs in Guatemala that are helping young people imagine and claim a brighter future. Following Jesus is not about taking on a particular role, or assuming a particular office. It is about offering up our gifts, our experiences, our ideas for the Spirit to use to further Christ's work, and allowing those to shape the ways we participate in Christ's ministry of healing and compassion and grace. And, together, we will behold Christ's kingdom as it unfolds in our midst.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

The Lord is gracious and abounding in steadfast love
The Lord is gracious and abounding
The Lord is gracious
The Lord is
The Lord

Lord, we pray that we may be open to your spirit whispering in the depths of our souls urging us
"to know what we ought to know,
To love what we ought to love,
To praise what delights you most,
To value what is precious in your sight,"*
To resist what is unjust,
To forgive those who wrong us,
To care for your marvelous creation,
To mend what is broken,
To spread joy where there is sadness,
To celebrate friendships and loving bonds,
and to never lose hope that you are drawing us to a better day.

Now, we join our voices as one to pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying: **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**

*From a prayer by Thomas A. Kempis