

“Fishers of People” – Matthew 4:12-23 – January 22, 2017

Our lesson this week from Matthew’s gospel is similar to the lesson we had last week from John’s gospel. The subject matter is the same – the call of the first disciples – but the story in each gospel is rather different. In John’s gospel, there is an emphasis on who Jesus is, his identity. Day after day, John the Baptist pointed toward him as the Lamb of God and the one who would forgive sins. Once while doing so, two of John’s own disciples began to follow Jesus after hearing John’s testimony. Then one of them, named Andrew, went home to get his brother Simon, telling him they had found the Messiah. In their initial conversation with Jesus, the call was an invitation to relationship. Sort of – “You want to follow me? Get to know me, and see what I’m all about. Come and see. Take the time to build a relationship with me before doing anything else.” The main point of the lesson last week was to nurture the relationship we have with God. When that relationship takes priority in our lives, discipleship – following Christ – is a natural result. The story affirms that we can have intimacy with God – we can know God – when we take the time to know Jesus.

Now this week, the story is quite different. It takes place in Matthew immediately following the event of Jesus fasting and praying in the wilderness for 40 days and being tempted. After that, we can assume that by now Jesus has returned to his hometown of Nazareth. Perhaps he has even gone back to his occupation as a carpenter. But one day, he hears some pretty devastating news. John the Baptist has been handed over to the authorities and has landed in jail.

John the Baptist was an interesting character. He straddled two ages. The way he preached a dramatic message of repentance to the people he took the form of an Old Testament style prophet. His demeanor and appearance was reminiscent of those figures in Israel’s history who brought God’s word to the people when they went astray. But he also functioned as the herald of a new age, the messianic age. His message spoke of one who was coming and bringing big changes with him.

But his actions finally upset the authorities, and he was imprisoned. It was a pivotal moment. Pivotal moments in history don’t always seem extraordinary at the time of their occurrence. But somehow they signal a change, and nothing is ever quite the same again. Consider Ernest Rutherford when he split the first atom in 1917. Or the priest Martin Luther who nailed his 95 Theses to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg. Or Rosa Parks who refused to give up her seat on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Or when Teresa Shook created a Facebook page calling for a march on Washington the day after the inauguration. At the time, these events took place in the course of a normal day, but each signaled change: the entrance into the nuclear age, the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation, the spark that

ignited the Civil Rights movement, and marches across the country and world in solidarity with women and other minorities.

The arrest of John the Baptist was a pivotal moment - it signaled the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. He moved from Nazareth to the small town of Capernaum. A seaside village in Galilee, Capernaum was populated by poor fishermen and farmers and Gentiles. Under the weight of Roman taxation, the people struggled to survive. Everyday life was hard.

This community occupied the far northern part of Israel. It was an area on the outskirts. It had fallen to the Assyrians way back in Israel's history and was now under Roman control. There was little hope for anything better. They were a community that was used to living in shadow – poor, overburdened, unnoticed. And this is where Jesus came, to the region that Isaiah prophesied would see a great light.

He began with a simple message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." I find it rather bold that Jesus would pick up the message of John the Baptist, considering John had been arrested. And while this is the same message preached by John, coming from Jesus it takes on new meaning. When John said it, he was pointing to the future. It was part of the coming attractions, for the new age that was about to dawn. But when Jesus said it, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," it described not a future event, but present reality. In him the kingdom of heaven has arrived.

Now this phrase kingdom of heaven will be a theme throughout Matthew's gospel. He doesn't take any time here to explain what it fully means – that will come later. But one thing is clear. This kingdom of heaven changes everything. It is accompanied by a call to repentance, a changing of ways, a moral turnaround. This kingdom of heaven, manifest in Jesus, is not something to simply be heard. It is something to be adopted into one's being. It is something that changes one from the inside.

Then we come to the call story. Five short verses, demonstrating what it is to be called into discipleship with Jesus.

Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee when he spotted Simon and Andrew. They were at work, casting their fishing nets into the sea. He called out to them, saying, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." They got up, dropped their nets, and followed him. Jesus then saw James and John out in the boat with their father Zebedee. They were mending fishing nets. Again, Jesus called out to them. They got out of the boat, left their father, and followed him.

What does this story tell us about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus?

First it shows that Jesus chooses us. Typically, in that time period, a student would seek out a particular rabbi with whom he wanted to study. But in this story, Jesus takes the initiative. He seeks out the disciple and offers the invitation.

There are points in our life, when we struggle with issues of faith. We seek answers and try to make sense of our lives, wanting to know our purpose and our reason for being. We search and when we finally find Jesus, we realize he has been patiently waiting for us all along. St Augustine wrote, "I could not seek you, if you had not already found me."

But sometimes we're not even searching when we hear Christ's call. Take for instance this story. The men are working. They are living out their lives as fishermen, providing food for their community and families. Their work is necessary and useful. But God's call changes all that.

He comes to them and says, "Follow me. I won't make you better fishermen. Instead I'll give you a new purpose – you will serve my kingdom and you will fish for people." He calls them to be his disciples. So what is the point here? Does he want us all to stop everything and go to seminary? Of course not. Obviously, we need people who fish and grow crops. We need doctors and teachers and plumbers. But if our first call, our first vocation is to serve God's kingdom, how can we integrate that into our occupation? Can we serve Christ in our role as a homemaker, a retiree, a student or grocery clerk? Can we share God's kingdom as we fix cars or install telephone lines?

Yes. It's a call to service of the kingdom through whatever you do. You don't stop being a Christian when you walk into the office or onto the job site or into school or into your home. You continue to serve God in and through your daily living. Your role as a disciple impacts your role as an employee, public servant, friend, parent, child, sibling, spouse, mentor.

The call to discipleship impacts all our relationships. Notice in the story, the men are brothers. Simon and Andrew, James and John. And they are also sons. The father of James and John is Zebedee. One day I'd like to write a message about Zebedee. Why didn't he get out of the boat, too? But that's for another day.

The call to follow Christ is not to destroy relationships but to renew them, to deepen them. The kingdom of heaven is all about relationships. Simon and Andrew are brothers by blood, but now they are also brothers in spirit. They are children of God. When we look at other people in terms of these types of spiritual relationships, it changes our interactions. We begin to see them as God sees them. Being a disciple means that our relationships will look different, deeper, better.

Last week in John the point of the call to discipleship was to enter into relationship with Jesus. Now this week in Matthew we find that the call to discipleship is still about

relationships, but now the focus is on relationships with others. We will be made fishers of people.

What I think Jesus means by this is that as a disciple, our focus moves outward, toward others. No longer are we living and acting for our own desires and benefit. Rugged individualism doesn't fit with the gospel. Living in the kingdom is living in relationship. We are community. All of us. Even the people who have beliefs and attitudes different than ours. Especially the people who have beliefs and attitudes different than ours.

Everything we do and say effects someone beyond ourselves. Being fishers of people is being mindful of our impact on others. Being fishers of people is being willing to build bridges with those with whom we disagree. Being fishers of people is lifting up those who have been marginalized and being aware of our own prejudices. Being fishers of people is seeking reconciliation where there is currently anger or distrust. These things are not easy. If it were, our nation and our world wouldn't be so divided. There wouldn't be so much fear. There wouldn't be so much hatred. To be fishers of people is a difficult calling. It is a calling to seek relationships with Jesus and with others. And it is a calling to begin to SEE Jesus in others.

And perhaps that is where we have to start. To work on the relationships closest to us, and to work on our relationship with Christ. As we get to know him better, and discover how he interacted with and related to the people around him, we can emulate these types of relationships in our own lives. It takes effort, but it is worth it. Like Simon and Andrew, like James and John, we are called to be fishers of people. If we answer this call, it will change who we are.

Are you ready to change?