

“Called”

Matthew 4:12-23
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Every time I read the story of Jesus calling the fishermen from their nets, I am halted in my tracks. I hope everyone here does the same, comes to a screeching halt. Three details in the story grab my attention and force me to reflect on what's going on. First, Jesus turns to very common people to begin what will become very uncommon work. Second, these very common people actually leave their livelihood behind in order to step into an unknown future. And third, Jesus gives only a slight hint; they will be 'catching people'. This all strikes me as a ponderous beginning to a movement that changed forever the way humanity relates to God.

Common people. More often than not, this is how God operates, working through the lives of ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary missions. The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. Matthew, the storyteller in this case, wants it to be clearly understood that Christian discipleship is open to all: the fish catcher, the fish monger, the fish filleter, the fish chef, and the diner who feasts sumptuously at the finest fish restaurant in town. Economics or social class shall not be a barrier to following the way of Christ.

This halts me in my tracks. It would have made sense, from one point of view, for Jesus to go directly to the bank president and the college dean and the CEO's of the Fortune 500 corporations. He might have picked out a world class athlete or a Golden Globe - winning film star or the hottest new model on Madison Avenue. But, lo, he summons two common fishermen from their nets.

So I really celebrate that South Church members include a truck driver and a Wendy's employee as well as an insurance executive, a school bus driver and a tool and dye maker as well as a stock broker, a waitress and a bank teller as well as a physician, a farmer and a nurse's aide as well as a veterinarian, a bookstore worker and guy who keeps snow blowers repaired as well as a superintendent of schools. The call to discipleship has been heard throughout the economy. People in every walk of life hear and respond to Christ's invitation, "Come, follow me." The invitation has a ring of authenticity to it. It has a ring of promise and hope. It has a ring of being trustworthy. The broad response to Christ's invitation halts me in my tracks!

The second detail in the story that grabs my attention is that the fishermen appear to leave behind their fishing business, their livelihood! When I reflect on this detail, it scares me a bit. It tells me that the cost of discipleship may be higher than first meets the eye. This little detail in the story causes me to consider the cost of Christian discipleship. Clearly, there was a cost to Peter and Andrew, to James and John. There always is a cost. And I'm not talking about money.

To be a Christian disciple is to choose a certain path. In his well-known poem, 'The Road Not Taken,' Robert Frost says, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." The cost of discipleship is taking the road less traveled. It is loving someone long after others have ceased to have a reason love. It is forgiving someone long after they have cashed in all their forgiveness chips. It is standing up for the poor when everyone has grown weary of standing up for the poor. It is walking for justice when justice is the last thing on anyone else's mind. It is singing a song of praise when there seems to be nothing left to praise. It is believing that even when all seems lost a new day is dawning, an Easter day.

For some, the cost of discipleship is simply too high. What Christ asks is out of reach. Those who choose to accept the cost of discipleship are the ones who also discover the joy of discipleship. It's these same fishermen who leave their nets in Matthew chapter 4 who witness the miraculous Resurrection in Matthew 28. When I think about what my own discipleship has cost me, I tremble and then I rejoice!

The third detail in the story that is halting for me is the part where Jesus says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." At first, this is a rather startling image, 'fishing for people.' As I slept on these words and saw them in their broader context, I saw that Jesus was inviting these fishermen to start thinking of their customers in a new way; no longer as customers with money in their pockets, but as human beings with wounds in their souls; no longer as targets for marketing their catch of cod, but as pilgrims in search of life's meaning; no longer as men and women who might buy their flounder, but as children of God who just might be looking for a little kindness.

It's not so much that they were called away from their nets; it's that they were called to relate to their neighbors from a new perspective, no longer simply as customers in a system of economics, but as human beings deserving respect and dignity.

This is halting to me. This means that we can all be ministers right where we work; right where we study; right where we recreate. About every other month, I go to my bank to wire money to pay school fees for children in Malawi. Though it is a simple business transaction, the bank officers now regard themselves as partners in this ministry. They no longer see me as a customer who pays \$35 for each wire transaction; they see me as a person with whom they can partner in sending Blessings Tambala to nursing school and Edward Kambatuwa to college.

And I no longer think of them as bank officers; they are now my colleagues in ministry. They are catching people. When I try to tell them that, they blush.

When I moved back to Glastonbury in 1988, there were several people I had known in the 1950's I wanted to see right away. One of these was Marjorie Sherman, although she was always Mrs. Sherman to me. For six years, she had been our cook at the High Street School cafeteria. I distinctly remembered her tight scrutiny of each of us as we went through the line and picked up our trays. She was the cook, but she was also the resident grandmother. She prepared our meals, but she also noticed our tears. She spread the butter on our bread, but she also spread the love on hearts.

I tracked her down living in the senior housing on Knox Lane, off Hubbard Street. I reminded her that she had cooked my lunch for six years in the 1950's and I asked her if she remembered me. Mrs. Sherman asked, "Did you clean your plate?" I assured her I did. Then she admitted to remembering only those who hadn't cleaned their plates. But it didn't matter. I was in the presence of a woman whose cooking was her ministry, whose food preparation was her soul work, whose way of doing her regular job made all the difference to boys and girls who were a little bit intimidated by their classroom teachers and who couldn't wait for the lunch bell to ring so we could go and be in the presence of Mrs. Sherman.

I don't know what church she went to. Maybe she attended this one! I don't know. What I do know is that she caught the idea of what it means to catch people: in the midst of our regular work to see even children as human beings in need of a little kindness.

I love it when I am halted by Scripture. I hope you, too, are halted by these ancient stories that are somehow as relevant today as they were 2000 years ago. Today, I wanted to open up this story of the calling of the fishermen, in the greatest of hope. Amen!