

Fishing and Following **January 21, 2024**

When I was in 8th grade, my family took a vacation out to Montana to go fly fishing. I had been fishing a few times before (sometimes with disastrous results), but I had never been fly-fishing.

So before the trip, we got the gear — a couple rods, flies, waders, vests. Once we got out to Montana, we went to different streams in our waders and we learned how to fly-fish. You might know that when you're fly-fishing, you can't just cast your line. You have to twirl the line around to build some momentum, and then you cast.

One day, instead of just fishing from shore, we decided to rent a few boats and take them on the river to fish. The term "boat" is generous – they were small rafts at best. In my raft, my dad sat up front. My uncle was on the right/starboard side. And I was in the back of the raft.

At one point, my dad went to make a cast. He twirled his line around to get momentum, and as he twirled it, the hook landed in my ear. Thankfully, he did not finish his cast, or I might've been hurled out of the boat headfirst. But my uncle thought this was just hilarious and congratulated my dad on landing the biggest catch of the day. Must've been at least a hundred-pounder.

"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." That was probably not what Jesus had in mind when he called those men to follow him.

It is such a memorable and puzzling phrase, isn't it? "I will make you fish for people," in the older language, or more accurately, "I will make you fishers of people." Less of an action and more a change in identity.

For most of my life, I have heard this as a call to go and hook others and bring them to Jesus. This is a call to proselytize, and so to be honest, I've never really liked hearing it.

It wasn't until recently that I learned that Jesus was not telling his disciples that they were going to "catch" people to save their souls. His exact meaning, though, is unclear. There are a couple possibilities.

In the Greek world (which Jesus and his follows were living in), fishing was a metaphor for teaching. "I will make you teachers of others."

In the Hebrew Scriptures, "hooking a fish" was the language used when God brought down a corrupt king or ruler. "Follow me, I will help you topple tyrants." I'm intrigued. That sounds like something from the Magnificat, the Song of Mary:

"He has brought down the mighty from their thrones
And has lifted up the lowly."

Or looking at other Gospels, Jesus uses fishing as an image for bringing about God's kingdom and restoring Israel. "Follow me, and you will help bring about God's kingdom here on earth."

That might just get me to follow Jesus to check things out.

So there are several possible meanings here in this phrase, “I will make you fishers of people,” but what Jesus is not saying is, “Let’s go win some souls.”

As it happens, Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John all drop their nets and follow Jesus – which is a bit surprising. If Jesus called me while I was standing in waist-deep freezing water in Montana, trying not to get a hook in my ear, sure! I’d drop my gear and follow him. That’s not a hard choice.

But these men were fishermen! This was their job, their livelihood, in some cases, the family business. They could’ve easily said, “We’d like to follow you, Jesus, but when do we get paid? How will we eat? Where will we sleep? What’s the plan?”

But they don’t ask those questions. They simply follow. That’s pretty admirable of the disciples, and it’s a good lesson for us.

We are here at church because we have sensed a call to follow Jesus.

- Maybe you find his teachings compelling.
- Maybe you are amazed at the miracles Jesus did.
- Maybe there’s something that resonates in you with his resurrection.
- Maybe you sense in this community, this faith family, a sense of the community comes from God, a holiness.

Maybe all of the above. We’ve all been called by Jesus in some form or another.

And we differ in how we live out that call in our everyday lives.

- For many of us, following Jesus involves regular worship.
- Following Jesus could look like reading the Bible on a daily basis.
- It could mean praying daily.
- It could mean intentionally being kind in situations where others are not.
- It might mean giving money to causes that do good work in the world.
- It might mean volunteering your time to help other people.

One of the principles of the Episcopal church is that discipleship is meant to be done in community. There might be individual practices for following Jesus (reading the Bible and other Christian books, private prayer), but we are most nourished by communal acts of discipleship — gathering for prayer, acts of service with others, learning together. We need other people to live out our Christian faith.

That is different than some other Christian traditions, which talk about discipleship and even salvation as a personal, private matter. “Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?” We don’t ask that in our tradition because we believe that we form a relationship with Jesus through our relationships with others.

This type of communal faith also goes against a lot of other parts of our culture, which is (for the most part) individualistic. In our daily life, we drive by ourselves; we live with our own small family units; we seek personal happiness; we base success on individual achievements.

So for us to get together on a weekly basis to worship with other people — some whom we know and some whom we don't know — is countercultural.

It's also a bit countercultural for us to say, "I care enough about the people around me that I will donate my hard-earned money to make sure they have food or housing."

Or to say, "I am going to pray for this person whom I don't know because she is important to you."

Or to share a meal of bread that takes like paper and a communal cup of wine.

When you think about it, our Christian life is full of these odd moments of community. And that is beautiful.

Finally, one more word about fishing, to bring things full circle. With today's fishing equipment, you can easily fish alone. In fact, that's what a lot of people like to do — to head to the creek or lake and spend some time in silence in nature. There's nothing wrong with that; that can even be a sacred time for folks.

In the days of Jesus, though, fishing was, by necessity, a communal activity. You needed at least two men to work the nets, and often, two or three boats (each with a couple fishermen in them) would cooperate to spread out their nets over a larger distance. You could not do net-fishing alone.

So fishermen became close with their co-workers because they relied on one another and grew to trust each other. And maybe that gives some insight into why Simon, Andrew, James, and John followed Jesus. They might not have known what Jesus was all about, but as long as their partner was coming, they weren't going to worry.

It's a rich sentence that Jesus gives: "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people." We hear something of Jesus' message: to teach and to speak against corruption, to follow Jesus in faith, and to be in community with others.

What a boat to be in.

Amen.

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