

**Sermon for 1-21-18**  
**Mark 1:14-20 & Psalm 62:6-14**  
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"Follow me and I will make you fish for people<sup>1</sup>."

10 words. A simple command. A call, from the mouth of a stranger, to four fishermen -- Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John. *'Hey, you out there, come with me. Leave the life you know behind. Follow me.'* And the most amazing part? They did it! Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John dropped their nets, stepped out of their boats, left their fellow fishermen standing there with mouths hanging open in shock, and followed the stranger.

You and I know, of course, that he wasn't just any stranger; he was the Anointed One, the Messiah. He was Jesus of Nazareth, prophet and teacher and healer and lover of souls, the Good Shepherd, the Prince of Peace. The Christ. But our four fishermen didn't know that. They'd never seen this man before. They didn't even know his name.

So why did they follow him?

I believe that our four fishermen -- Peter, Andrew, James, and John -- had a problem. Not an obvious problem, like faulty nets or a debilitating illness, but an invisible problem, an existential problem, a spiritual problem that was also a social problem.

These four men were peasants, like all farmers and fishermen of first-century Palestine. The structure of society was clear and inviolable. Most people were peasants, like our fishermen; the peasant class comprised almost 90 percent of the population. These were the laborers who caught the fish, cultivated and harvested the crops, herded the sheep and goats, and processed the grain and wool. They worked hard, day in and day out, but were unable to amass any significant wealth or power -- because in first-century Palestine, the wealth and the power was concentrated at the highest levels of society -- the elites, like priests and landowners and

soldiers, and the Roman rulers, like Herod and Pilate. The peasants and slaves labored tirelessly in the fields and on the seas, but the fruits of their labors belonged to the rulers and elites.

We can imagine that life for our four peasant fishermen was not easy or satisfying. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were regular men, 'Average Joes,' who worked hard for little reward. They had no hopes of upward mobility, or greater security or comfort. We can imagine them waking up before sunrise, preparing for yet another day of laboring to make some other man rich, and asking themselves, 'Is there nothing more than this to life?'

What kind of existence is it, to be trapped in a society that declares you to be expendable, replaceable, valuable only for what you can produce to enrich those more powerful than yourself, discarded and forgotten when you cease producing? How must it feel to be nothing more than a cog in the wheel of a giant imperial machine, a machine that does not allow advancement or escape? Perhaps we can imagine our fishermen living with a creeping sense of despair, experiencing mental and spiritual atrophy, losing any sense of themselves as worthy or significant. Some of us would call this life a living hell.

But our fishermen had one great glimmer of hope. They were religious men, faithful men, who said their prayers and observed the sabbath and went to synagogue services where they heard words from the Torah describing God's power and promises and faithfulness to the Jewish people. They heard the stories of Israel's bondage in Egypt, of the journey through the wilderness to freedom, of the covenant with God and return to the Promised Land. It's not a stretch to imagine that for our four fishermen, and for all their fellow peasants, God was hope's only foundation. The Psalmist's words might as well have been their own: "For God alone my soul in silence waits; truly, my hope is in him... In God is my safety and my honor; God is my strong rock and my refuge<sup>ii</sup>."

Peter and Andrew, James and John followed Jesus on that day at the Sea of Galilee. The stranger who was the Christ saw these men, he called to them, he gave them a purpose and claimed them as his own. For them, this moment changed everything. Our four fishermen followed Jesus because in him they saw the fulfillment of their deepest longing and the realization of their greatest hope. Nineteenth century writer Thomas Kaine described the encounter like this:

"When [Jesus] speaks, he cuts right to the heart. Peter and Andrew, James and John can't tell us exactly what happened. But what their hearts have always longed for, what they have always looked for in the wrong place, in a flash opens before them. They follow him because their hearts are so full; they can walk away from everything else."<sup>iii</sup>

When Jesus called to our four fishermen, they heard for the first time the voice of hope and love and peace calling their names. They heard the voice of God, offering them a new path, a new hope, a new life. And the Good News for us is that Jesus calls to us, too. The Holy Spirit is moving amongst us, and Jesus is calling us out -- calling us out of our daily routines, calling us out of the systems and behaviors that trap us and reduce us to our bank accounts or our educational achievements or our political affiliations. Right now, in every moment, Jesus is calling us to leave our old ways behind, to follow him, to make his way of peace and hope and radical love our way.

Following Jesus is not a part-time gig. Discipleship is not a Sunday morning commitment. We can come to church every week, we can put our money in the offering plate, we can sing hymns and share in Christ's holy communion - - but if we leave it all behind when we walk out the door, we are not his disciples. Jesus asks more of us, just as he asked more of those four fishermen on that day two thousand years ago.

I saw a news story out of Chicago this week that took my breath away. Maybe you saw it too. A man named Maurice Anderson, a regular man, an 'Average Joe' just like our fishermen, was riding the Red Line on his way home from work, when he noticed an older man sitting directly across from

him. The older man appeared to be homeless. A few minutes into the train ride, the older man slowly and gingerly removed his dirty, ragged shoes. I'm guessing that the smell was not pleasant. Maurice Anderson noticed that the man's socks were wet, and tinged with blood that had been seeping through the fabric. Instead of being disgusted, and moving away to avoid the stench, Maurice Anderson looked this man in the eye and asked him, "What size shoe do you wear?" The man answered that he wore a size 12. And Maurice Anderson leaned over, unlaced his brand new, size 12, \$260 snow boots, and handed them across to the older man, with a simple "Here you go." Another passenger was so amazed that she took pictures and posted the interaction to social media, with the following words: "During a time when hate and apathy are rampant, quiet compassion appears without warning."<sup>iv</sup>

Christ's call comes without warning, for the fishermen, and for us. You and I and Maurice are Peter and Andrew and James and John. We can hear Christ's call and turn back to our normal routines. We can tell ourselves that peace and hope and radical love are not possible, and we can fool ourselves into believing that 'business as usual' will satisfy our hearts and feed our souls.

Or we can choose the path of discipleship. We can put down our burdens and our fears and follow Jesus. We can live the way he asks us to live. We can hand over our boots. We can feed the hungry and heal the sick and welcome the outcasts and love one another, and we can do it all secure in the knowledge that we are known and called and claimed by God.

It doesn't seem like much of a choice, does it? Are you ready to say yes?

Let us answer Christ's call together, in this place, in this community, in the weeks and months and years to come. May it be so. **Amen.**

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 1:17 NRSV

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<sup>ii</sup> Psalm 62:6 & 8

<sup>iii</sup> Kane, "Inhabiting the Gospel," p. 46 in *Lectionary Illuminations*.

<sup>iv</sup> [abc7chicago.com](http://abc7chicago.com)