

Following Jesus

Third Sunday after the Epiphany: January 25, 2009

Mark 1 14-20

The Rev. Richard Nelson

The call Jesus extends to his first disciples in Mark's Gospel, and their immediate response, seem so stark; perhaps even straining believability. Jesus suddenly pops up, sees four presumably young men in their work, and invites them to follow. Without even a passing question from the four - such as: who are you, or follow you where? - they leave their work and follow.

What can we make of this? Jesus says the Kingdom of God is near; not a far off utopia, but the reality of God at one's finger tips. In this first invitation Jesus gives no evidence that God's Kingdom is dawning; he does not appeal to their power of reasoning, or their emotions. Jesus presents no strategy for their future; he does not offer a promise of future reward. Jesus calls, and we are expected to respond.

Andrew and Peter, James and John do follow - immediately. They are not following a theology, philosophy or ideology but a person. They follow Jesus with undisguised urgency. He does give them a promise: He says they will from now on fish for people. I have to confess I like the old expression better, so I will adapt it slightly. Jesus tells them that if they follow him he will make them "fishers of humanity." Implicit in this promise is a change of identity and purpose. It is not simply their activities and goals that will change; *they* will be changed.

Before Jesus' call the two sets of brothers were fishermen. It was their livelihood and vocation, but also their identity. This is how life works: what we do, and especially our day-by-day "doings" over an extended period of time, sears an identity into us, effecting one's personality, values, perceptions and priorities. Jesus promised them they would be changed. Their new identity as 'fishers of humanity' will have similarities to their former lives: there will be hard work; perseverance will be especially necessary; a set of skills to accomplish the work will be learned; they will often work 'blindly' if you will - not always knowing what is happening beneath the surface of things - and at times they will work 'in the dark'; the results may not always be what is hoped for, and sometimes the 'catch' will be mind-boggling.

Of course, there will be significant differences between their old lives and the new life Jesus gives them as "fishers of humanity." Formerly they caught fish to kill and eat, and sell; now they will catch people in whom Jesus will bestow new life. Before, they were motivated in their work by the fear of destitution and the hope of material gain; now, they will fear nothing and will hope in the complete establishing of God's kingdom. In the past they competed with rival fishermen for the best and largest catch; now, they will put aside competition so that all of Jesus' followers will find unity in Him.

It is clear that in Mark's Gospel the calling of the four fishermen is representative of Jesus' call to everyone. This is the 'pattern', if you will, of becoming a follower of Jesus: answer the radical call of Jesus to follow him alone with one's own radical "yes"; expect and embrace the change-at-the-core-of-one's-being that Jesus will give you - your identity, priorities, values, morals and actions will be Kingdom of God centered; Jesus calls each one to follow him into the Kingdom, giving her and him a new identity and a common vocation with all other followers of Jesus as "fishers of humanity".

Fishing for people is the way in which we live our radical "yes" in response to Jesus' call to follow. It is the means through which the Kingdom life is brought to reality in one's own life first, and through our own lives into the lives of others. How do we do this? I will give three very specific examples of how you can live your vocation as "fishers of humanity". There are many ways to live this vocation through one or more of St. Thomas' ministries and ministries in our community. My heart tells me to share these three this morning, but not at the expense of other ministries; I offer these three as representative.

Our St. Thomas Thrift Store has operated for a number of years, doing important ministry so we may support worthy Outreach ministries in Southeast Georgia. Last year our Thrift Store gave \$25,000 in grants to a variety of helping ministries; the list of grant recipients is posted on the bulletin board outside the Church office. By donating your in-very-good and excellent condition items you keep the Thrift Store well-stocked. Yet an equally crucial and perennial need is for volunteers to staff the Thrift Store on Mondays, Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays. A day or two a month can significantly affect others' lives and your own. To get more information about the St. Thomas Thrift Store contact Candy Baxter, who chairs the Thrift Store Board, or speak with me.

Over the past 13 years our Unseen Guest Ministry has provided over 53,000 meals to people suffering from HIV/AIDS. Two cooking crews meet monthly to prepare and package the meals. They meet the fourth Monday of the month at 6pm and the second Friday of the month at 8:30am in the St. Thomas parish kitchen. As with the Thrift Store the importance of these ministries is so apparent I need not elaborate. For more information, speak with Selena Johnson or me.

Lastly, and this is an urgent call being made, is our Lay Eucharistic Visitors ministry. Lay Eucharistic Visitors – LEV's for short – take Holy Communion immediately after Sunday worship to those who are ill, homebound, in nursing homes, or in hospital. In my time at St. Thomas we have never had enough LEV's and right now we are acutely lacking in people responding to this need. LEV's literally bring the Body of Christ to those otherwise unable to be physically part of the Church on Sunday. The LEV ministry extends the boundaries of the worshipping community into the lives of those who cannot be here. LEV's do not replace clergy visits but supplement what clergy do. I cannot say strongly enough that this is a crucially pressing need at St. Thomas. I would like us to have 9 or 10 LEV's, each serving one Sunday a month, so at least two of those unable to be with us can know the Church is extending our boundaries to include them Sunday by Sunday. We need 9 or 10; at present we have 3. Please search your heart and open yourself to hear Jesus' call to be involved in this ministry. You will receive training, and as a Lay Eucharistic Visitor you will truly be a "fisher of humanity."

The Kingdom of God is near, and Jesus calls you and me to be "fishers of humanity." May we hear his voice, and may we eagerly respond. Amen.