

Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany



Text: Mark 1:16-20
As Jesus walked along the shore of Lake Galilee, he saw two fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew, catching fish with a net. Jesus said to them, "Come with me, and I will teach you to catch people." At once they left their nets and went with him. He went a little farther on and saw two other brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were in their boat getting their nets ready. As soon as Jesus saw them, he called them; they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and went with Jesus.

In the Hands of Amateurs

A pastor tells this story.

I received a phone call first thing one morning. The person on the line said with obvious excitement, "I need to see you. Come over this morning. I need to have breakfast and have my hair done. So how does eleven o'clock sound?"

I agreed to go over to her house. I had learned sometime before that she was not a person to be trifled with. When she ordered me to appear at her house, I appeared at her house.

As soon as I arrived, I was directed to sit on her lime-green sofa. She told me, "I have called you over here because the most wonderful thing has happened. I have personally—right before my eyes, as big as life, just like you are sitting here in front of me right now—seen Jesus."

"Oh?" I asked in amazement.

"Yes. You thought this kind of thing only happened to TV preachers. Well, it has happened to me. You probably think I'm lying, don't you?"

"No. No, why would I think that?" I asked.

"Well. It happened. Last night George and I had been out to dinner—to that new Italian place on the edge of town. I had eaten too much. Really had bad indigestion. Was up and down all night. I'm sure you know what I mean."

"Well, about two or three in the morning, I just sat straight up in bed. I thought I heard someone call my name. At first I thought it might have been the indigestion. But there, right at the foot of my bed, there he was. As big as life. Actually, a little bigger than life. My Lord. He was dressed in white. Shining. Just like he is in the third window from the left on the right side of the church. He said, just as clearly as I'm speaking to you, 'Gladys'."

I said, 'Here I am, Lord' or words to that effect.

And he said, "Gladys, follow me. I have work for you to do." Then he was gone. That's why I've called you over here. I

want to follow Jesus and do his work totally, completely, without holding back."

"Well," I said. "This is wonderful. Only a few of us receive such visions. And I am only too happy to help you think through ways you can serve the Lord."

"Well, let's see. Have you thought about teaching? The Bible study group lost its leader last month. You might be just the one to . . ."

"Bible study group!" she exclaimed. "Me teach the very group who were so arrogant when George and I first moved here? I would like to tell them a thing or two. You wouldn't want me to teach that crowd."

"Oh, I see, well how about the little kids that go to Sunday School? You know we have a real problem getting folks who can help keep the . . ."

"Preacher! Have you lost your mind? Can't you even remember visiting me in the hospital last year when my back went out? That would be suicide for me. Don't you know that working with little kids means bending down, sitting on the floor, even lifting them up? My back hurts just thinking about it. Besides wiping snotty noses makes me puke."

"I get the picture", I said.

"You know, before you retired, you worked as a secretary using a computer. Now there's a job that needs doing at the church! If I could get you to type for us, only a couple of mornings a week, that would enable us to ..."

"Oh no, you don't," she said, "I thought I made myself clear when you went and bought that expensive computer that I

was opposed to getting. We had nothing but trouble with them in the office where I worked. But no, you thought you knew more about computers than anybody else so you are stuck with it. I would lose days even months of work when it crashes. No, that computer is your problem."

I made a couple more attempts to figure out what Jesus might have had in mind when he asked her to go to work for him; but to no avail. Finally, in exasperation I said, "Look, why don't you just think about it. Maybe visit that Italian restaurant again; perhaps you'll have another vision. And next time, would you do me a favor? Don't let him get out of your bedroom without telling you exactly what he wants you to do. OK?"

Gladys had a problem. She heard the call of Jesus and her response, though initially enthusiastic, never resulted in anything. So unlike the fishermen Simon, Andrew, James and John.

The gospel writer Mark gives us just the bare facts. A lone figure stands on the edge of the water silently watching them. The man calls out, "Come with me. I have a job for you. I will teach you to catch people". Mark tells us that they immediately left their nets and went with Jesus. Without hesitation they left their father, their friends, their workers and their nets and followed him.

Jesus called these men into a relationship with him, into the Kingdom of God, not because they stepped forward and volunteered. In fact, they may not have even known he was standing nearby until he called out, "Come with me!" He called these ordinary men to be disciples and in doing this he was calling them to be prepared to have their lives turned upside down, to have the present and the future radically

rearrange, to be part of the pain and struggle that comes with God's Kingdom breaking into the lives of people.

This leads us to our story. This is a story about discipleship. It's a story about how you got it into your head that you ought to be a disciple. This is a story about how you got here this morning. You are here because you were called to be here.

These days we are big on decisions and the freedom and right to make choices. On this life Sunday we mourn the lost babies that were aborted because of bad choices. People see their lives in terms of their self-creations, their shrewdness, their cleverness and their intelligence. But this scene on the shores of Lake Galilee tells us that discipleship is first and foremost a result of God's decision. We are projects of the living Christ, something that Jesus makes and moulds through his relentless reaching out to us.

- You are here because you were put here.
- People decide to go to the theater.
- People thumb through the Saturday newspaper and see some concert being presented that night and say to themselves, "That looks interesting, let's go". But that's not how you get to church. You move toward the kingdom by being summoned, invited, addressed and called. This thing is by invitation only. You have to be called. (Even if this is the first time you have ever been into a church, the same still applies).

This is your story. This is why most of you are here this morning.

Every time we baptize, no matter what the age of the person being baptized might be, as Jesus calls that person they are initiated into the Christian life. In effect God is saying to that person, "The life you live is not your own. You are named, claimed and commandeered. I have plans for you. I have a job for you. Now, go live out your calling".

Just grasp this fact.

All God has to give to the world and wants for all people:

- the expansion of God's great Kingdom;
- the sharing of the love that God has for others;
- the supporting of those who need God-like strength to get through their difficulties;
- the passing on of godly wisdom when it comes to teaching others about good choices;

all of that is in the hands of a bunch of amateurs. We wouldn't run a business that way, but this is the way God gets what he wants. "Follow me!" he said to those fishermen. "Follow me!" he says to you and me. "You might be amateurs in matters of the kingdom but I will make you my disciples. I will give you the Holy Spirit to whisper in your ear and teach you what you need to know".

Gladys heard Jesus call her to do something in the Kingdom of God, but she missed the next step – actually doing something.

She did what I would call 'a Jonah'. We heard about Jonah in the first reading this morning. Remember how God called him to go to the notorious city of Nineveh with a message

about repentance. Instead of doing it, he argued that what God expected of him was impossible, dangerous, and down right stupid. A person would have to be half crazy to tackle anything like that. And so he tried to put as much distance as possible between God and himself.

What those 4 fishermen did was equally as crazy. Jesus spoke to them – no bright lights, no rolling thunder, no visions or dreams, no angels dressed in bright clothes – Jesus simply says, "Come with me" and they immediately got up, left everyone and everything, no easy thing to do, and indicated their readiness to be taught how to catch people.

There was a man, a graduate of his country's finest medical schools. He could have had a lucrative practice. He was a brilliant musician and could have toured Europe and lived comfortably. But he went as a medical missionary to Africa! Why? On what basis? "I just had a feeling it was what God wanted me to do." That's it? A feeling? An impulse?

Ask most of those who serve in the church, how they came to be doing what they are doing and you will find their stories so mundane and ordinary. Of course, there will always be that story about blinding light, the voice from above, the bolt from the blue, the visions of Jesus. But from what I have heard, the spectacular call is unusual. Friends have told them that they are crazy giving up what they had to get involved in some crazy and half-baked project. There are people better qualified for such a calling. But that's the way God does things.

When God called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, Moses himself thought God had it all wrong. What qualifications did he have to do make such a demand of the

king of Egypt?

Likewise when God called young Jeremiah to deliver a severe message, Jeremiah thought God must have lost the plot.

A farmer by the name of Gideon was called by God to lead an army and save Israel. A farmer called to defeat a powerful enemy – God must have the wrong person.

Simon, Andrew, James and John – just ordinary fishermen – were called by Jesus to bring God's Kingdom to others and change lives.

And Gladys, a retired secretary, called to do God's work.

That's how it often is. God calls amateurs and puts his kingdom in their hands. He calls them to obey, to do his will, and expand his rule in the lives of people in all kinds of circumstances.

The sad thing is that we have too often failed to respond to the call of Jesus.

For all the times we ignore what God commands,

- for the occasions when we have selected hearing and hear only what we want to hear,
- for all the times we have let down other people because we have gone our own merry way believing that what God is asking is insane,
- for all these occasions and more, we are glad that Jesus was obedient to the call of the Father, even to the point of dying on a cross to give us forgiveness.

May God grant each of us ears to hear when he is speaking and willing hearts to obey what he commands. He calls you and me, amateurs in matters relating to his kingdom, to be his disciples in this community.