

sermon-1/23/11 Newport Pres. Church
“Fishing Priorities”
Matt. 4:12-23

If you were here last Sunday and remember the scripture passage from John’s gospel about the call of Andrew and Peter, this scripture in Matthew’s gospel might perplex you. Matthew seems to have heard a very different story than John. It would take some very creative work to make these two scriptures fit into any meaningful sequence of events.

We could spend a lot of time and energy trying to figure out which one of the versions of the call of Peter and Andrew is correct. I want to suggest that would not be the most productive use of our time or the best way to approach scripture.

It is far better to just admit we will never know how things really happened and then concentrate on what the gospel writers were trying to tell us about Jesus. These writers have different agendas in telling their story.

John focuses on Jesus’ question: “What are you looking for?” Those were the first words out of the mouth of Jesus in John’s gospel. First words are important. They can set the tone for what follows. That question continues to haunt us today. What are you looking for in life? Where is your passion leading you to spend your best energies? What do you want to get from this brief span of time you have been given to live on this round planet we call earth?

John says we won’t experience life at its fullest unless we are looking for a relationship with God in Christ. We need the grounding, the hope, the purpose a relationship with God provides. To look for something else won’t satisfy. If we look for wealth, success, fun adventures, sex, comfort, we will be let down. Disciples of Jesus realize this. They will organize their lives to spend more time in the presence of God in Christ. Those first disciples took risks to be with Jesus in their search for God.

Matthew has a different agenda revealed in the question behind his version of the call of Peter and Andrew. Instead of What are you looking for? Matthew focuses on What do you value? What are your top priorities in life? How do your actions back up the answer you give to that question?

Disciples, according to Matthew, value following Jesus more than they value their jobs and even more than family loyalty. Peter and Andrew leave their work. James and John not only leave their work, but also their father to follow Jesus. They all made a choice. That choice will change their lives.

Both gospels are call stories. For John the call is to come and see where Jesus is and then decide if that is what we are looking for in life. For Matthew it is Jesus’ call to follow me. This morning we will spend some time on Matthew’s version of the call.

The Jesus we encounter in Matthew’s gospel sounds a lot like John the Baptist. He comes out of the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan, where he had to get his priorities straight, and

then proclaims, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Repent is not about beating our breasts and feeling guilty. It is about figuring out what direction our lives are headed and then turning around if we are going in the wrong direction.

Either we are walking toward God or away from God. Either we are making this world a better place or we are adding to the heartache and brokenness. Either we are walking toward the light, or we are making this world a darker, more violent place. We need to take our pulse from time to time. We need to see where we are heading and repent if we are not going in the direction of life, peace, and truth.

We repent because the kingdom of heaven is at hand, has come near, is hovering right in our midst. The kingdom of heaven is not just about the next life. It is also about living this life as if God reigned as king.

Do our actions reflect God’s reign or do they reflect other priorities? Do we say we value being a Christian, but only nurture our spiritual lives if there is nothing more pressing on our plate? Matthew says, “Fish or cut bait.” Make a decision as to what you really value and then take the leap. He emphasizes this leap by repeating the word “immediately.”

That “fish or cut bait” metaphor is actually a good one for Matthew’s story. Matthew says we are not only called to repent, we are called to fish for people. He is talking about evangelism here, about sharing our faith with others, about inviting others to become part of the Christian community.

I have to agree with some commentators when they say that the image of fishing for people is not the most attractive metaphor for evangelism. Are we supposed to hook people for Christ? What bait should we use? Snaring people for Christ feels like a call to trap people in the net of our Christian zeal and self-righteousness. Most of us cringe.

But if we are not inviting others who don’t have a church home to give ours a try, if we are too embarrassed to speak about what gives our life meaning, about the most important relationship in our lives, then we are just not hearing the Jesus the gospels present to us.

One commentator says many of us Christians act like the best way to fish is to head out into the water in a boat and hope the fish see us coming and jump into the boat all on their own. Surely others will see how attractive our boat is and will want to be part of our community. This is the type of evangelism that could be called: open the doors and they will come.

To be honest, this sermon is as much for me as it is for you. Evangelism has been done so poorly in my lifetime I have tended to not want to have anything to do with it. Given the way Christians are most often portrayed in the Seattle Times and other parts of the news media, I find myself being embarrassed to be lumped in with some of the Christians portrayed there.

But, we have good news to share. Many in this church have gone through some very tough circumstances in their life. Certainly Newport, especially recently, has encountered some very difficult deaths and illnesses. Most of us simply could not survive the heartache life inevitably

throws at us if it were not for communities like Newport that surround us with love and support. That alone is a gift we can be proud to offer our friends and neighbors who don't have a home church.

Life is tough. We won't get through it unless we understand what we are looking for. We won't grow in our faith until we determine our priorities and then reflect those priorities with our actions and our best energies. And we won't fully live into being disciples of Jesus until we figure out how to share this good news with a hurting world, and maybe even our neighbors. Amen