

sermon-1/25/09 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“We Have Been Called”  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10 and Mark 1:14-20  
By Jim Patten

I learned something new this week about fishermen in first century Palestine. I had always thought when Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John to be his disciples, he was calling relatively poor men. As it turns out, one of my newer commentaries said those who fished for a living were more what we would call middle class.

They point out several things. Those fishermen in Mark, chapter one, owned their own boats. James and John apparently had hired men that worked for them. We learn elsewhere in the gospels that Peter owned his own home. These fishermen were not rich, but they weren't poor either.

That makes this story strike a little closer to home. These were not poor folks who had nothing to lose when they followed Jesus. They were more like us. Choosing to follow Jesus required them to give up plenty, or at least hold on less tightly to what they had.

We are going to do a little pondering this morning about what it means to be called by Jesus to be his disciple. The first thing to note in this passage is the first words out of the mouth of Jesus in Mark's gospel. First words are important. They give us a context out of which to see the person in the rest of the story.

We are told Jesus did some preaching, but the first actual quote ascribed to him was, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” Mark's gospel, then, will be all about what it means to be a follower, a disciple, of Jesus. Since the disciples have many similarities to us, we can't ignore the implications for our own discipleship.

“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” Some of us have been turned off by this notion of fishing for people. It sounds a bit manipulative. It sounds like we are to learn what bait to use so that we might catch people and reel them in. It reminds us of those who think being a committed Christian is all about saving sinners, button-holing people so they will convert to Christianity.

If that is what fishing for people is all about, count me out. The People's Commentary on the New Testament says that is not what Jesus meant. It says fishing was a metaphor in the Hellenistic world of that day for teaching people. The authors say when Jesus uses the term he is referring to, among other things, participating in God's work of restoring Israel. Jesus was inviting those early disciples into a wonderful vocation that would change everything.

Wil Willimon puts it this way. Jesus says I am “going to change the whole world, transform the future, radically rearrange the present, and guess who's going to help me?” As it turns out it is the disciples, it is people like us, and eventually it is us who will help Jesus do this.

Willimon concludes that thought with these words. “All God has, all God wants for the world, God’s great, expanding kingdom, all of that is in the hands of a bunch of amateurs. It’s a strange way to run a railroad, but this is the way God gets what God wants.”

How do we get involved in this great work? We are called. Unlike in Judaism of that day, where people sought out their teacher, Christians are called. Scholars tell us the literal meaning of the church is “the called-out ones.” As one commentary puts it, Christians are not part of a “voluntaristic society promoting good, but those who have been drafted.”

Wow! That is a very different way of looking at it, is it not? We have been drafted by God. We think we are in control and our participation in the Church is totally voluntary. But, if we take this other perspective seriously, we need to come to terms with being called by God. Does that mean if we ignore the call we are draft dodgers? It gives one pause.

When we are called, Mark’s gospel says, we are faced with prioritizing our lives. What takes precedence? This is symbolized in our story by the disciples leaving their boats and even their parent in the case of James and John. They left everything and followed Jesus. The call of God in Christ became more important than their work and even family obligations.

I want to be quick to add I don’t think Mark is telling us our family obligations are unimportant. We are not asked to ignore our families when we become Christians. But Mark is stating our giving priority to God’s call does force upon us some tough choices.

Martin Luther gets at this in his great hymn, “A Mighty Fortress.” The third line of the fourth verse says, “Let goods and kindred go. . .” Luther knew following Jesus was serious business.

I realize we are not going to let goods and kindred go in any complete way. I’m pretty sure our commitment to God in Christ is not asking us to do that in a literal way. But, as we loosen our grip on those two important aspects of our lives, the power to join God’s restoring work is unleashed in ways that might surprise us.

What would it take for us to loosen our grip? For some of us it would take a miracle. One commentator actually says this call story in Mark is really the first miracle story in that gospel. The power of God was unleashed in Jesus’ first words, in Jesus’ call to follow him. That power has the ability to change lives.

Those of us who call ourselves Christians might want to ask how has our accepting being draftees in God’s kingdom changed our lives? How has it affected our parenting, our approach to giving? How has it relativized our other commitments, giving them penultimate status, at best, and not ultimate importance.

Today we are going to baptize Andrew Kwon. This is a big deal. One commentator put it this way. "Every time we baptize, no matter the age of the person being baptized, as we initiate this one into the Christian life, in effect we say to that person, 'The life you live is not your own. You are named, claimed, and commandeered. God has plans for you. God has a job for you.'"

It will be Katrina and James' job as parents, Sarah and Zach's job as godparents, and our job as the community of faith to help Andrew recognize the call of God in Christ, and to be prepared to respond when he does. It is a big responsibility and a huge privilege.  
Amen