

They Dropped Their Nets

Matthew 4: 12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Heard a story about a member of a small church who received a phone call from their church asking if they might consider becoming an elder. They told him to take some time to discern if God was calling him to be a leader or not. But without hesitation he said, “I’ll do it!” No questions. No need for reflection. It was an immediate answer without getting all of the details. Just to be clear: I wouldn’t recommend it! But notice, the same thing occurs in the gospel story. After hearing about John the Baptist’s arrest, Jesus begins to set up his ministry. He needs people to help him. So he walks along the beach and calls out to a couple of blue collar brothers fishing, “Follow me.” Immediately, it says, they hopped out of their boats, dropped their nets and followed. No questions. No time to reflect. Immediately, without getting all of the details.

Wonder: what compels them? What compels them to drop their nets, leaving their old life behind? Maybe they were ready for a career change? Perhaps they heard of John the Baptist’s arrest and had to do something about it? Some have said that, historically speaking, everyone who had a job was held accountable to the Roman government. So perhaps they were tired of feeling like a pawn in the system? We don’t know, it doesn’t tell us. However, whatever it was that compelled them is probably the same which compels us. We feel a calling. We want to give ourselves to something we believe in. We need for the world to be different than it is. Heard last week that someone joined Rev. Boni’s Matthew 25 study group because she saw our Black Lives Matter sign hanging outside. It compelled her. So begin by wondering: what compels these disciples to drop their nets and follow Jesus? What compels us?

Whatever it is, it is a shift. “Now you will be fishers of people,” Jesus says. To be honest it isn’t my favorite thing Jesus says. Probably because often when we hear the phrase it seems like we are to go around netting people while using the gospel as bait. But it’s so much more than that. You see, Jesus starts by proclaiming that the “Kingdom of God is at hand.” And what is the kingdom of God about? It’s about people—all people. People who serve all people. People who

make room for all people. People who work toward making God's kingdom values a reality for all people.

Which leads me to a provocative question: can someone be a follower of Jesus *without campaigning for kingdom policies*? Could we still be following Jesus if we support sexist, or racist, or homophobic policies which threatens someone's humanity? Or a candidate who believes in scapegoating immigrants? Or someone who works at widening the gap between the rich and the poor? I know it's a provocative question. But you see, lately I've been thinking about how there is so much talk about individualism in our country—individual rights, individual beliefs, individual salvation. We hear about our individualism so often that we don't really question it. Except, in the context of God's kingdom, there is no such thing as an individual, there is only human persons who are interconnected. So a threat to someone else's humanity is a threat to all of ours. "What affects one person directly, affects all of us indirectly," as Dr. King puts it.

In God's kingdom, there is only community which are made up of persons—not individuals—who are responsible for and care for everyone. So, can we follow Jesus without campaigning for kingdom values?

Well, however we answer, Jesus is still calling disciples, isn't he? Still needing people to help make God's project a reality. The first disciples drop their nets, and we have had to let go of some things, in order to follow Jesus as deeply as well. Last week I received a phone call from an elder of a PCUSA church in North Dakota. She googled PCUSA affirming churches and somehow our name popped up. So she called to ask questions about how we became an open and affirming church. I told her the story about how in the 90's this church made the choice to let go of biblical literalism and embrace everyone. Listening to her struggles, I realized that there are still so many places who can't let go of fear so the church can be a healing and freeing place instead of a harmful and controlling one. So after we spoke I emailed her our zoom link and invited her to join us. And guess what? She showed up and said, "I would feel at home at your church!"

Whether it has been singing African American songs and learning to clap on two and four. Or learning a bit of espanol in the liturgy and singing songs in Spanish to make our Mexican friends feel at home. (And how patient they have been with us as we learn!) This is a place where we let go for the sake of following Jesus more deeply, building up community, and sharing God's love with whoever crosses our path. And as we keep letting go again and again, do we not experience a deeper sense of connection and joy!

So today we ordain two new leaders, Nikki and Susan, whose gifts can help us to deepen the vibe of this church. Jesus is still calling us. Still compelling us to share God's healing love with whoever comes across our path. Thanks be to God for that. Thanks be to God for you. Amen.