

012223 – Sermon – “Leaving Our Nets Behind”

“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men!”

It’s a familiar invitation. It is the story we recognize of Jesus calling his first disciples at the beginning of his ministry. I think we all have the pictures in our minds of those men, dropping their nets and “immediately” rushing to shore to follow him, leaving everything behind – everything! – not just the tools of their trade but their careers, their homes, and their families. It’s mind-boggling really, isn’t it?

What does it take to have that much trust in someone calling you from the shore, a man who is not a fisherman, who is not even a neighbour you grew up with. What was it about Jesus that made not one, but four, grown men decide this was the right thing to do. They didn’t stop to think about it. Our scripture tells us they left *immediately*. They didn’t even ask any questions. Where are we going? What’s the rush? Can you wait while I pack a few things, tell my wife, pay a few bills? I have always wondered how they knew that this was the right thing to do. How did they know it was safe or at least that the risks were worth it?

Last week we wondered why those who set the Lectionary cycle interrupted our study of Matthew with a sudden, single reading from the book of John. Well, this week I’m glad they did! I have always thought of these two stories as different versions of the same event – Jesus calling his first disciples: James and John, Andrew and Simon Peter.

In last week’s reading, John the Baptist points Jesus out to his followers – “Look! There goes the Lamb of God. He’s the one we’ve been waiting for!” Andrew, and another of John’s disciples are intrigued and curious. They follow this guy who John thinks is so special. “Where are you going? Where are you staying?” and Jesus says, “Come and See.” So, they go and spend the rest of the day with him. Andrew is so impressed and inspired that he runs to get his brother, Simon. “We’ve found him! We’ve found the Messiah! You’ve got to come meet him!” And when Simon and Jesus meet, it seems that Simon impresses Jesus too. He calls Simon “Peter” – someone who is as strong and secure as a rock.

This week’s reading is very different though. John the Baptist has been arrested and Jesus seems to have gone into hiding for a bit, leaving his home in Nazareth and heading toward the Sea of Galilee. There he sees these same 4 men in their fishing boats and calls to them, “Come and follow me!”

Last week, in John’s story, Andrew is drawn to Jesus and seeks him out. Andrew takes his brother to meet Jesus. This week Matthew tells us that Jesus finds Andrew and Simon and invites them to follow...

I have always looked at these two very different stories as two versions of the same event - Jesus’ calling of his first disciples – two different stories by two different writers, with two different interpretations of how this little band of disciples began. This week, however, I saw

something new, something that actually helped clear up my sense of amazement that these four random fishermen just seemed to blindly drop everything and follow this stranger on the shore....

These are not two versions of the calling of the first disciples... They are two parts of the same story – a sequence of events. Look at what happens when we read the two stories in sequence.

One day when John the Baptist is with his disciples along the Jordan River, Jesus comes by. “See that guy?” he asks Andrew and his friend, “He’s the one I told you about, the one who is coming who is more worthy than me, the Lamb of God.” They are intrigued and they want to know more so they follow him. Jesus asks them, “What are you looking for?” and they ask him, “Rabbi, where are you staying?”. I wonder if this is a way of asking, “Can we join you for a while? We’d like to learn from you.” They spend the rest of the afternoon together and then Andrew runs home to find his brother Simon. “You need to meet this amazing guy! I believe we have found the Messiah!”

Some time later we hear that John is no longer on the shore of the Jordan River, proclaiming and baptizing. He has been arrested. His followers have scattered - perhaps in fear of being arrested as well, or maybe, being left without their leader, they have just gone home. They have dispersed, but I imagine they have not forgotten what John was preaching. All they had seen and heard and learned as his disciples would still be filling their minds. They all saw the truth and urgency in what John had been preaching and they were encouraged by the great numbers of people who had made the journey to that bank on the Jordan River, ready to turn their lives around. The momentum for change was just beginning to build when it was shut down. Rome was just too powerful. Their leader was silenced and his followers scattered – home to safety, to a quiet life where they wouldn’t attract any suspicion. But... they had seen the sense in what John had said. It was hard to go back to the way things were and just dismiss that feeling of excitement that comes when a positive change is in the air.

Fishing, mending nets... lots of time to think... time to talk with others who had been there too... time to try to figure out next steps... What can we do? What should we do?... Feeling like John would want them to be doing something, but what? Surely, we aren’t strong enough to stand up to Rome. We are just fishermen after all.

And then, one day a figure shows up on the shore. It’s him! The rabbi who John not only trusted but actually revered as the leader who would come after him, the one he called the Lamb of God. It’s Jesus, the one who stirred their heart that day!

“Follow me boys! There’s work to be done and I need some skilled fishermen to help me fish for souls.” That call is the answer to the longing in their hearts

It’s a story of call ... and both parts of the story are needed for us to truly understand.

Although we often encounter the concept of “call” in terms of ministry or faith, it is not something that happens only in religious circles. People are called to many things, some calls are huge – like dropping everything to head in a new direction – and others are small – like putting money into a beggar’s hat – and a myriad of things in between, but all calls have some things in common:

- A strong inner urge toward a particular course of action
- A desire to solve a problem or improve a situation
- A feeling or thought that just can’t be ignored

Sometimes a call comes in a flash and we don’t have time to even think about it – like someone who jumps into the water to save someone from drowning. We might think of this as being in the right place at the right time – a coincidence or maybe divine intervention...

But, more often, I believe, a call is a feeling that is around for a long time before we act on it. Unlike the sudden call to save someone in immediate danger, almost without a moment’s thought, a call is often something that we give a great deal of thought to, and something that we often try to dismiss or deny – not me, not now, not possible – but it just won’t go away.

You would think that a call would be loud and clear – or maybe we just wish that was the case. I think, though, that calls are more often not clear at all or perhaps we just aren’t listening when they come. Sometimes, too, we think we’ve heard our call and then it turns out that wasn’t it at all.

I can tell you that I thought I had heard my call several times throughout my life – a call to be a Social Worker, then a teacher, a wife, a mother... a call to help children in other places, a call to adopt... Each time, I was sure I had heard a clear call to my purpose in life – and each time I thought I was done, another call came... to BCUC and then to Diaconal Ministry...

One thing I can tell you for sure is that not one of those calls came with the clarity or the certainty that I should immediately drop my nets and follow. Life changing decisions need the time and space for discernment. Time to ask the questions... “Why me?” ... “Why now?” ... “What if?”... Time to understand what is being asked... time to consider the ways it will affect those around me... time to be sure that what I think I hear is really what God is calling me to do and not the voice of my ego... time to dig deep and know that I have the skills, the stamina, and the heart to see it through.

The United Church of Canada builds this time in to the journey to ministry. The discernment process seems at times like a lot of hoops to jump through but it is designed to make you face the hard questions both outwardly and inwardly so that when the time comes to make those ordination or commissioning promises your path is clear. You are ready to drop your nets and follow.

The story we read in the book of John last week gives us a look into the path of these fishermen as they engage in their own discernment. The voice of John the Baptist telling them to “Repent”, to turn their lives around and start down a new path, the voice of Jesus inviting them

to “Come and See”, the fear and uncertainty when their leader is arrested and they are sent running, the time to reflect and wonder and struggle with the new conviction that things need to change but unsure of how they can possibly be part of it...and the affirmations of Jesus who tells them, “You are just the people I need. Come, follow me.”

What makes a man who catches fish the right person to fish for souls?

A fisherman knows that catching fish every time you cast your net is not guaranteed but that you need to keep casting, every day, if you want to succeed. It takes patience and resilience.

A fisherman knows that you can't use the same bait for every kind of fish or on any kind of day. Fish will be attracted to what they need most.

A fisherman knows which fish are ready to keep and which to put safely back in the water to continue growing.

A fisherman knows there is more to this job than hauling fish into the boat. The catch needs to be kept cool and fresh. There is work to do to get them ready for sale or for eating at the end of the day.

A fisherman knows that some days will be busy on the water but some days you need to stay home and repair your nets on shore. Some days will be sunny and calm but storms can hit when you least expect them and you need to be prepared.

A fisherman knows that the others on the boat all have important roles and that each member of the crew needs to be able to depend on the skills and knowledge the others bring as well as the trust that they all have each other's backs. There is no room for ego on the water; they need to work together to work together to succeed and to stay safe.

A fisherman knows that there is always more to learn.

I like the thought that Jesus was not a stranger to the men he called from the shore that day. I am comforted by the thought that they had been given time to discern and that they were ready when Jesus came to find them. We don't hear that their father, Zebedee tried to hold them back or cursed them for leaving him holding everything together while they went off on an impulsive jaunt. It makes me think that their families knew what they were being called to do and were ready to support them in this decision.

That's the way a call should be answered – with confidence that the decision made is the right one for everyone concerned. Jesus wouldn't have called just any fishermen he saw from the shore and those men who had been disciples of John would not have blindly followed any stranger who called to them. The work had been done to make this the right time to make this life-changing commitment, to drop their nets and follow.

We hear again and again that Jesus is calling us too – even today. But I don't believe we are being asked to follow blindly any more than I believe those disciples were on that day so long ago. The first invitation is there to "come and see!" Come and see what the ancient writings of our ancestors have to teach us. Come and see what it looks like to be part of a community that works together to make this world a better place, to help build God's kin-dom here and now. Come and see what gifts you have to offer, how your experience and your skills might be used in that work. Come and ask the hard questions ... Ask the hard questions of yourself, of each other, of God.

How do I know that it is God calling?

What needs to be done?

What difference can I make?

What am I being expected to do?

What do I have to offer?

Why me?

Why now?

What if?

What has led me to this place, to this point?

How will I know when it's the right time?

... What nets do I need to leave behind?

There may be some in this world who are lucky enough to receive a call that is loud and clear, and a path that is open to follow it. It wasn't that way for me and I know many others who have struggled to hear their own call. I've known others that, even after they have clearly heard their call, have had to forge new paths or carry heavy burdens in order to follow it. God doesn't ask us to follow blindly. God wants us to move forward with eyes wide open and the kind of passion and confidence we need to do the work we are called to do. We can only do this by putting in the time and the effort of discernment that we can follow freely.

May we all hear Jesus when he calls from the shore and be excited and ready to follow where he leads us, leaving our nets behind.