

“Fishing for People” a sermon by the Rev. Keenan Kelsey 1/27/08
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian church

TEXT: 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 lake, 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 realm 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 lake—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. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

“REPENT, for the realm of heaven has come near.
Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishermen, but not in the same way that you are fishermen or fisherwomen. Contemporary fisher-folk are sometimes called anglers – a wonderful 15th century word that refers to the “angle” made by the fishing line as it comes from the pole. Anglers fish for sport, for fun. They catch one fish at a time.

Our disciples-in-waiting fished with nets, heavy nets that required many people to unfurl and cast out and grab tight and haul in; large nets that required many people to shake out and clean up and repair and fold.

Their kind of net fishing, brought in huge numbers of fish all at once. It was hard work. demanding attention, cooperation, and teamwork. For the brothers Peter and Andrew, and for the brothers James and John, It was their occupation, not recreation. It literally kept them and their community alive.

What would have made them put down these nets to pick up another sort of net? In John last week, we had would-be disciples that sought after Jesus. In Matthew, Jesus takes the initiative, and the men willingly follow. Some scholars think these men had also been disciples of John the Baptist, which might help explain their willingness. They might have intuitively understood that at its heart, seeking God, especially through Jesus isn't propositional, it is "incarnational" faith, an embodied faith, a faith which requires both thought and action.

But it was also something about Jesus himself. Ending his brief sermon with those words, fish for people, Jesus offered a vision for the world, a dream, a picture of how life is intended to be. Jesus saw a world where God ruled in every heart, a world of righteousness, peace and justice. A world of love and harmony and unity. I think that might be one of the reasons that it seemed so easy for these men to put down their lives and pick up their call. They would have understood that this new kind of ministry would be a community effort, one which binds us together in a unique way, which requires work and commitment, and which produces results that are life giving.

Certainly Jesus talked about heaven and life in the hereafter, but his primary vision was for this world today. Jesus said that this kingdom is at hand. It is available. It is not merely a distant concept. It is a present possibility. The disciples got excited. They knew all about fishing for fish, but Jesus was calling them to something far more significant. He was calling them to reach out to men and women to this experience of love, this realm of authentic power, this kin-dom of heaven on earth. He was calling them to be the church. And they went.

Of course, being the church isn't always that easy. Think about Paul's letters to the Corinthians. The young church at Corinth was in such an uproar it required not one but two letters from Paul right from the start, that church has had a hard time staying focused. Everybody in that church had made the decision to follow Jesus. After all that's what a church is - a group of people who have decided to follow Jesus. But the congregation had so many problems:: arrogance; pride and indifference. The letters also mentioned gluttony, laziness and intolerance. As a result there was also depression, and anger and despair. Paul saw it all pointed to one simple fact - the people in the congregation at Corinth had fixed their focus on themselves and on one another instead of fixing it on the Christ. They divided up into groups which blamed each other for the problems of the church.

How easily churches seem to get off the track. I was just reading about the Willow Creek Community Church outside of Chicago. This program-driven church is one of the most influential churches of the last 30 years. They have measured success on the basis of participation, and indeed they have hundreds on their campus at any one time. Their Sunday services attract thousands. But this past October the church released a study which said that their members were being dutiful but not necessarily faithful. It turns out that multiple sets of activities do NOT predict whether individuals come to love God more or to love people more. Executive pastor Greg Hawkins confesses: "We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and become Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become 'self feeders.' We should have taught people, how to read their bible between service, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.." The Willow Creek mission these days is turning increasingly to service and global concerns.

And of course there is our church. Not this congregation, but the Presbyterian Church (USA). We are deep in our schism of Biblical witness and questions of inclusion. And like the church in Corinth, we have taken sides. There is no question about what this congregation believes about Jesus' vision for the church.

We are a More Light Church. That is, we are part of a conscious, conscientious, and conspicuous coalition of congregations and individuals in the Presbyterian Church (USA) committed to increasing the full participation of all people of faith in the life, ministry, and witness of the Presbyterian Church regardless of sexuality. We have a visible political alignment that subscribes us to the More Light mission statement.

As such we stand with and for Lisa Larges as she moves toward ordination. And like the church in Corinth, we are called to do this with passion but not persecution, with righteousness but not rancor, with a call to freedom but also to forgiveness. We have a call to fish for people, not to drown them.

The name of our commitment, More Light, goes back to the 1600's, when John Robinson was the spiritual leader, well pastor, of the pilgrims who set forth to found the Plymouth colony. Although he died in England before he could join his followers in the New World, Robinson had urged the pilgrims to be open to new religious teaching, new ways of being the church., In 1646, as he bade farewell to the pilgrims as they set sail on the Mayflower he counseled *...if God should reveal anything to us by any other instrument of his, we must be as ready to receive it, as ever we were to receive any truth by his Ministry. For he was very confident the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word.*

No teacher yet had perfect knowledge of God, Robinson had said. "For though they were precious shining lights in their Times, yet God had not revealed his whole will to them; and were they now living," saith he, "they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light as that they had received."

In just a few minutes we will sing George Rawson's hymn from the 1850s based on these final words. Pastor John Robinson would like our scripture readings today. He would like our courage in following Jesus as we understand the vision and calling. He would like that Lisa is with us today and that we in turn stand with her. He would not have understood the current issues of sexual orientation, but he would have stood firmly on the ground of religious freedom and inclusion, of letting go and letting God, of knowing that God is always doing a new thing.

And he would like this announcement that came over my internet yesterday. At a Special Called meeting of the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area, meeting at Christ Presbyterian Church in Edina, Minnesota the Presbytery voted to pass the following motions: "The Committee on Ministry recommends that Dr. Paul Capetz declared departure from G6-0106b be not found to constitute a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity under G-6.0108 of the Book of Order. The Committee on Ministry recommends that Dr. Paul Capetz be restored to the exercise of ordained office of Minister of Word and Sacrament."

Without going into details, I will tell you that this case is as historic as Lisa's is for More Light in our denomination. It comes alongside our Presbytery in allowing an avowed GLBT person to declare a departure of conscience and to be approved, or in this case restored, to ordained ministry. It is a sign that the light does indeed shine in the darkness, and we must never, never give up.

What is it again that fishers of people do? They work together never alone. They know that the One who calls us stands with us. They cast Love's net. They show up to be exactly the people God needs and intends for the mending of the world and the bringing of the realm of God. . If we're lucky, if we angle ourselves just so, if we remember that our very lives depend on this fishing trip, but that it's also great fun – then we, too, will be caught up in Love's net.

Fishing for people is not trolling for numbers or sharing the gospel with threats of punishment, or using eternal life as the bait. It is not trying to reel someone in to repent and follow Jesus. It is not even signing someone up as greeter or reader. It is becoming part of the community networks of relationships with one another and with the greater world. It is seeing that the dream of the kin-dom is the rule of God in every heart, a world freed from the grip of human inhumanity, freed from prejudice and fear and greed and hatred. It is knowing that the vision of heaven is still at hand in this world, a very real possibility wherever there are followers of Jesus who are willing to live out that which they believe.

Jesus always calling our names. Always asking more of us. Always loving us.
Let us follow.

AMEN

We Limit Not the Truth of God

George Rawson (1807-1889) wrote this hymn in the 1850s based on the final words Pastor John Robinson gave to the Pilgrims before they journeyed to the New World.

We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind --
By notions of our day and sect -- crude partial and confined
No, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred
For God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word.

Who dares to bind to one's own sense the oracles of heaven
For all the nations, tongues, and climes and all the ages given?
That universe, how much unknown! that ocean unexplored
For God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word.

Eternal God, Incarnate Word, Spirit of flame and dove,
enlarge expand all living souls to comprehend your love;
and help us all to seek your will with wiser powers conferred
O God, grant yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word.