

Sunday, January 22, 2023

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 & Matthew 4:12-23

“For What Are You Fishing?”

Rocky River Presbyterian Church

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

¹⁰Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” ¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.). ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. ¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Gospel Lesson

Matthew 4:12-23

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.

¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶the 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.”

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ¹⁸As 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. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As 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. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. ²³Jesus 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.

“For What Are You Fishing?”

For the past few weeks, I have been talking about this time of the year as the season of Epiphany, the time when we see in scripture how people come to recognize Jesus and in him the hope of salvation and redemption he brings to the world. This time of year is also referred to as “Ordinary Time.” Ordinary Time is exactly like it sounds – ordinary; It is called Ordinary in part because of what it is not; it is not advent or Christmas or Lent or Easter. Which means we are not preparing for any celebration of the birth, death, or resurrection of Jesus.

The stories of “Ordinary time” are filled with examples of ordinary people, going about their ordinary lives when they meet Jesus and make the decision to follow him - not because a star announced his birth or an Angel appeared to them in a field, but simply because Jesus said “follow me.” The response to that command is where things got a lot less ordinary today.

Matthew starts today’s passage by moving the scene of the action. After hearing that John the Baptist had been arrested Jesus left Nazareth and made his way to Capernaum in the region of Galilee. In one way, this move continues to underline and highlight the ways Jesus life is bringing about the fulfillment of Isaiah’s ancient prophecies about the Messiah. But in another way, the text seems to go out of its way to note that Jesus has moved into a less than desirable “neighborhood” – He’s living with the GENTILES! Jesus has willingly moved to the “Galilee of the Gentiles” to begin his public ministry. He is now living in an area of the promised land that is heavily occupied and controlled by the Roman Empire. It is into this context that Jesus begins to proclaim, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

In what I imagine were his early days in Galilee, Jesus does what any good transplant would do, he goes out looking for his community, for those who will join him and his mission to proclaim the kingdom of heaven. I think he goes down to the sea because he figures that is where the people are. When Jesus first sees Simon and Andrew, they are casting their net into the sea. We don’t know if these guys were having a good day, or having one of those days where you cast the nets for hours and haul in nothing more than old tires. (not that I know anything about that). The story simply tells us that Jesus sees them and says, *“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”* They drop their nets and follow.

Shortly after, Jesus encounters two more brothers, James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were mending their nets and he called them. Both times, Matthew uses the same word to describe the timing of their reaction – IMMEDIATELY – and both times, Matthew tells us how they respond – they follow him. They walk away from their livelihood, from their family...James and John literally leave poor Zebedee sitting there in his boat...

¹“Follow me.” It’s a command that comes over and over again in Scripture. God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their home, their family, their identity, and sojourn into an unfamiliar land. God called Rahab to shelter spies sent to Jericho. God called Samuel, three times as a young boy, to be God’s servant who would eventually anoint Israel’s first king. God called prophets like Isaiah to summon the people of Israel to open their prosperity-glazed eyes and see God in their midst. God called Mary to give birth to God incarnate. And God called fishermen from their nets to follow Jesus.

As James O. Chatham notes: From the beginning, God *has called people*; God has stepped into their lives and pointed them in new directions. God does this throughout the Bible; few pages go by without it. Is this not a strong signal that *God is going to call us too*; that in some moment when we are involved in a normal day’s pursuits, God will walk up to the lake shore and beckon us to leave our fishing boats for a future we had not planned?

A lot of times we believe that God’s call only comes to those who are Clergy and Christian Educators. However, in Matthew’s gospel that idea is challenged by the very fact that these first disciples were fishermen. They were ordinary, everyday people, going about their very ordinary, everyday lives. They were people who worked with their hands, who likely lived day to day, hoping they would catch enough fish to survive. Their hands and faces were weathered by wind and sea. They probably said things they shouldn’t. And yet, this is Jesus’ target audience – fishermen from the Gentile region of Galilee. Just like the shepherds on the hillsides heard the news of his birth, God again brings in unlikely people into the extraordinary story of our salvation. This should cause us to take note. Maybe, God will even call us into the story – if we are open enough to hearing Jesus’ say, “Follow Me.”

What does this call look like for us today? Most of us are not sitting on boats waiting for Jesus, but like those fishermen, we are going about the ordinary details of our daily lives. The disciples were working as fisherman, but when they received the call, they enthusiastically followed. And Jesus gave them a new vocation – to fish for people. He took the skills they presumably already had – fishing – and used their abilities (learned and innate) to help them learn how to be disciples. I believe God’s call works in the same ways today. God nurtures in us the talents, gifts, and interests that we have, and helps us find ways to use them to be a part of what God is doing in the world. These often become identified as spiritual gifts, and range from beautiful singing voices and compassionate hearts to the ability to organize and understand numbers. All of these are needed for the work of Christ’s kingdom – therefore, all of us are called.

¹ Elizabeth Lovell Milford – Heritage Presbyterian Church

Reflecting on God's habit of calling people to participate in the redeeming work of God in the world, my friend and former colleague, Agnes Norfleet said, "I used to think the call to discipleship was a moment when the stuff of faith just clicked and a commitment to Christ was made. I have grown to realize that we are called to be followers of Jesus over and over again. And we are **never** asked to go it alone. Just as Jesus first called brothers to follow together, so we have one another to partner with, to hold one another accountable, to hear the claim of Christ upon our lives and to heed his call to follow him into the world of need to do the work of God.

As we sit here today, Jesus is calling, saying "follow me."
On a cold Sunday morning in January in northeast Ohio, Jesus is saying "follow me" into a warm community of faith so we can worship, give thanks, and be nurtured for the road ahead;

"Follow me" because there is work to do to help Rocky River share the love of God with the community gathered here and with the larger community beyond these walls;

Follow me – when you see that coworker, classmate, or neighbor who doesn't seem to have anyone to talk to;

Follow me – when you see someone who is hungry, or without shelter;

Follow me – when you see someone who is struggling with health crises

Follow me as you are uniquely equipped to do; using all of the gifts and skills you have been given;

Follow me along with your family of faith so you will have the support and care needed to meet the needs of this unique time and place.

Follow me, Jesus says, and I will make you fishers of people.

Amen