

“Fishers for All People”
+ Epiphany 3 A +
Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23
January 26, 2014

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!
The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

Today’s text finds Jesus relocating the center of His ministry operations to Capernaum. The weather this week in Capernaum (Kfar Nahum)a town, then, as now on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, the weather will find highs in the upper 70’s and lows in the 50’s. At the time Jesus moved there it was a fishing village and resort town of about 1500 people. The fish caught by the fishermen was dried, salted, packed in oil and sent in sealed jars all over the Roman Empire. Of course if you lived there you had fresh fish – all you could eat and there was a trade road close by so goods and wares from any exotic place were yours if you had the money. You can understand with the warm, even in the winter, climate and the fresh inland sea breezes why Capernaum was a resort town – well, for the Romans and the wealthy.

Taxes were high – Matthew, the author of our Gospel was a tax collector there. He, and the fab four fisher-folk, Peter, Andrew, James and John all worked for the government in reality. You had to have a fishing license to run a fishing business in Galilee. You paid the government for that license – paid them a lot – more than 50% of what you took in and then you paid more taxes on what you caught and sold each day. The local Jewish population worked hard for their daily bread. Though Jesus later cursed the city for a lack of faith the local Jews were religious enough to have built a very nice Synagogue where Peter & Co. were, no doubt, members. Tax collector Matthew was likely not welcome. Even in those days people hated their version of the IRS – particularly because the tax collector made his living by adding an extra fee on top of what the government took. There were Romans in the area – the Centurion who sent word to Jesus asking him to heal his servant was stationed there.

Oh, Capernaum was an interesting place to set up ministry headquarters for Jesus. Not a great center of activity, out of the way and yet the locals had to speak Latin to deal with the Roman authorities, Greek to do any kind of business transactions, Aramaic, as it was their native tongue and Hebrew for religious purposes and if you went across the way in Naphtali and Midian there would have been local dialects to further decipher and understand. It was to this “up north” region Jesus comes with the message, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.”

Hmmm...John is in prison for preaching about repentance and a new kingdom (which made King Herod uncomfortable because A. he had so much to repent for and B. because he liked being King). Is this really the message Jesus should have led with? Was it smart to go to out-of-the-way Capernaum and call ordinary people right in the middle of their ordinary lives to do extraordinary things? Well, that is exactly what Jesus did and still does.

Yes, Jesus is still calling you to follow – even though most Christians today will tell you they don't "feel called" or understand how their everyday job or vocation fits into their Christian calling/vocation; don't see most of what they do outside of the church as worthy of God's attention and interest. How can that be? you ask. I'd say because while pastors, deaconesses, professors of theology, Lutheran school teachers and other church professionals are shown to actually derive significant satisfaction, purpose, and meaning from our work research shows the amount of satisfaction, meaning, and purpose that the same is not true in many other working sectors. Why? Because for most people work is, well, work, with moments of meaning and purpose but often devoid of a real connection to their faith, their core beliefs and what they treasure most in life. What do people treasure the most? Their relationships. In the study I'm citing even those who identified their work as a source of meaning and fulfillment usually cited their relationships at work as the places of particular significance.

Which leads us to consider one particular phrase in today's Gospel reading: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." Jesus didn't tell them – doesn't tell us you will be "emissaries of the kingdom," "heralds of God," "disciples of the Messiah" or "witnesses of the Divine," but "Fishers for ALL people." (I say ALL because Matthew ties this in with the prophecy of the light coming to people outside of God's chosen people – and Capernaum is a crossroads for all kinds and sorts of people and languages – kind of like St. Paul, MN these days). All of those other title may have been implied or might have eventually come to be, but what strikes me is that Jesus is calling these first disciples not into work but into relationship. This Kingdom come near is not going to be like the work they've done for the Roman government as licensed fishermen or tax collector, no they will be bringing people into a relationship with Jesus (well, the Holy Spirit does that, but you catch the significance – this is working for a completely different "boss.").

Martin Luther and the other reformers spoke at length about the highly relational nature of our calling, our vocation – living as Christians in every aspect of our life. Yes, we live in a society, are participants in a democratic republic set up to give order instead of chaos; to care for our neighbors, both those people who happen to be all around us and especially those who are in need but we, as God's people, are to live out our calling – to Fish for all Folk in whatever tongue/language necessary to share the Gospel. That is our baptismal vocation – it starts with the water and the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Part of what makes this passage and others so difficult to grasp is the idea of getting up and leaving everyone and everything you know to follow Jesus. It makes us picture the disciples as extraordinary, first-century super heroes of the faith to admire but not to identify ourselves with in any particular way. It is daunting that Matthew reports that when Jesus comes and calls they immediately follow – we are, as readers, as people called through our baptism to follow, as well, are meant to take notice of this dramatic response!

But exactly how are we to live out our calling/vocation to be "Fishers of People?" The answer is in relationships. Jesus calls these first disciples into relationship – a relationship with himself, with each other, and with all the various people they would

meet over the next few years and, indeed, for the rest of their lives. This Gospel of Matthew ends, with another invitation to relationship to those who gathered to watch Jesus ascend to go into all the world and make disciples by baptizing them (into the name of God Father, + Son (who had literally come to be in personal in-the-flesh relationship with them) and the Holy Spirit (who in-filled them and in-fills us with the very power of God) and teaching the people God leads us to what Jesus taught them and is teaching us – Salvation alone through faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Jesus issues the same call to us today - to be in genuine and real relationships with the people around us, and to be in those relationships the way Jesus was and is in relationship with his disciples and with us: bearing each other's burdens, caring for each other and especially the vulnerable, holding onto each other through thick and thin, always with the hope and promise of God's abundant eternal and everlasting grace. Sometimes that call - to be in Christ-shaped relationship with others - will take us far from home and sometimes it will take shape in and among the people right around us. But your call/my call will always involve people - not simply a mission or a ministry or a movement, but actual, flesh-and-blood people to know, to love, to be hurt and be hurt by, to forgive and be forgiven by, warts and all people.

So, let me end with something I said at the very beginning where I lost some of you to daydream about being at the seaside in 80 degree weather: Jesus called the disciples and is still calling ordinary people like you and me right in the middle of our ordinary lives to be in relationship with the ordinary people all around you to do extraordinary things. To love as Jesus loved – to follow when you're not sure just where that will lead – but knowing that Jesus is there with you – the Holy Spirit is there to guide you – and placed in the midst of God's people where you will be, you are loved, nourished in Word and through the Sacraments and where anyone you invite to come with you to worship, to learn, to grow, will be – is always welcome. AMEN