

Third Sunday after Epiphany – A

“As Jesus 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 fishers of men.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

The game warden in a certain fishing village began to notice that one particular fisherman was bringing back more fish each night than all the others combined. This made the warden both very curious and very suspicious. So one day he decided to go along with the lucky angler to see what was going on. The fisherman steered his boat into a secluded cove and dropped anchor. Then he opened his fishing box and removed a stick of dynamite. He lit the fuse and waited until it was almost spent, then threw the stick of dynamite out of the boat. As it hit the water, it exploded, sending a huge gusher of water into the air. Then scores of fish, either dead or stunned by the blast, floated up to the surface and were taken into the boat. Seeing this, the warden was furious. “See here,” he said, “I will not allow you to continue in this manner you’re breaking the rules and I’m going to issue a summons for you to appear in court.” Whereupon, the fisherman lit a second stick of dynamite, put it in the warden’s hand and said, “Are you gonna talk or are you gonna fish?”

Peter, Andrew, James, and John are fishing. They are not using dynamite. They are using nets. It’s hard to say what they might have thought of dynamite if someone had told them about it. They probably would have thought it was the work of the devil and wouldn’t have had anything to do with it for fishing or any other purposes. That’s just as well. Dynamite is not something you should fool around with if you don’t know what you are doing.

They are fishing in the Sea of Galilee, which is actually just a large lake and not even that large when compared to the some of the really large lakes in the world. But it is easily the largest lake in Israel, a place that has very few lakes. And these two sets of brothers are fishing. Technically, only Andrew and Peter are fishing. James and John are mending the nets. But let’s not get too picky here. Mending the nets is part of fishing. If the nets have holes in them, you don’t catch many fish. So each group is fishing. And Jesus calls to them. He tells them that if they follow him they will continue to fish, only they won’t be fishing for fish, they will be fishing for people!

And how do these two sets of brothers react to this surprising offer? All four drop what they are doing and follow Jesus. They leave their life’s work, their chosen profession and follow this itinerant preacher. And in both cases they do so “immediately.” Jesus calls and they become his followers. Case closed. Obviously, these four are very focused on Jesus. Now contrast that with the situation that causes Paul to write to the church in Corinth. These people are out of focus. Some are apparently still focused on Christ. There will always be a faithful remnant. But some have become focused on Paul, some on Peter, and some on another disciple named Apollos who did much missionary work in the early church. Apollos is mentioned at the end of Chapter eighteen and the beginning of nineteen in the Book of Acts. It is speculated that this group that claims Apollos is trying to turn Christianity into another philosophy which would

empty it of its power. Corinth is in Greece, and the Greeks were very prone to that sort of thing. And when Paul writes about Cephas, he is referring to Peter. Cephas is a Jewish form of Peter's name, and it may be that this group is those who favor following the Jewish law. The Corinthian church is mostly Gentiles but there were some Jews.

Through the centuries, this type of dissension has been a reoccurring problem for Christianity. We love and trust our leaders and rightly so. Anyone who brings us God's truth is deserving of our love and trust. But many times people go beyond love and trust and actually come to put their faith in their beloved leaders. That puts them on the same level with God and leads us away from the truth. Many of you, like myself, have a great love for Bishop Vic. We love him and we trusted him because he was a kind and dear person who has brought us the truth. And that truth has helped us to put our faith not in him but in the Lord. Anything else would have grieved him greatly. Trust is knowing you can count on someone when you are in trouble. Faith is knowing you can count on God for salvation. It is important to have friends you can trust. It is even more important to put your faith in God and him alone.

So why are these two sets of brothers so much more focused on Christ than so many of the people in the Corinthian church? The first thing that comes to mind is time. Peter, Andrew, James, and John have just encountered Jesus. Obviously he makes a strong impression on them which is easy to understand since he is the Son of God. We are not certain how long it has been since the Corinthians first came to know Christ. They would not have all discovered the good news at the same time, but certainly some time has passed, evidently enough time for many of them to have lost their focus. But that does not seem to have been the case with the twelve, or at least eleven of them – all but Judas. They did not lose their focus. Yes, Peter did one time say Jesus must be wrong about the crucifixion. But that was out of a lacking of understanding and his deep devotion to him. Jesus became their life. They made mistakes, but they remained focused on the Lord. On the night Jesus was arrested, Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." And the others all agreed with him. Even though he did deny him, we all know that Peter absolutely meant what he said. The fact that they were unable to stand by him in his hour of need made them the most miserable of men for a time.

They thought the Lord was lost to them. We know that the Lord will never be lost to us as long as we keep focused on him, and even then he is always there waiting for us to regain our focus when we realize what we have lost. This brings us back to the church at Corinth. Paul must be ready to pull his hair out at the news that the church is splitting into factions over who to follow when they have been taught to follow only Christ. Can you imagine what Bishop Vic would have said if some of the people of Saint Clement's or Saint Paul's said they belonged to him rather than Christ? He'd probably shout something in Spanish and we wouldn't want to hear the translation. Most of us became Christians when we were young and long before we met our dear friend Bishop Vic, so naturally we know we belong to Christ as does he.

The situation is different in Corinth. These people did not know of Christ until someone brought them the good news of salvation. Apparently some of them have equated the bringer of the good news with the bringer of salvation. In an episode of the Andy Griffith Show, Reverend Tucker has invited a guest preacher from New York City. This has put Aunt Bee in a dither as she is getting ready to go to church on Sunday morning. She is not certain if she should wear earrings or not. Talking on the phone to her friend Clara Edwards, she says, "Well I always imagined people in New York to wear earrings, but I'm just not sure." After she hangs up she turns to Andy and blurts out, "I've always taken my preaching from Reverend Tucker, and he's always been good enough for me." Andy, who has so far been frustrated in his efforts to get Aunt Bee and Opie out of the house and into the car so they can get to church, responds in desperation, "Aunt Bee, they're on the same side!" Paul, Cephas, and Apollos are on the same side. But the Corinthians have used them as an excuse to divide the church. Paul is not quite as succinct in his summing up the situation as the good sheriff of Mayberry, but then again the problem in Corinth is a bit more complicated than the value of hearing a preacher from New York City rather than good ol' Reverend Tucker.

So this morning we have two opposite examples of responding to the call of Christ. There is the negative example in the church at Corinth where people use one of the messengers of the good news as an excuse to try and change the faith. And there is the positive example of Andrew, Peter, James, and John along with the rest of the twelve who kept their focus on Christ.

But while the twelve maintain their focus on Christ, we actually see them doing very little fishing in any of the four gospel accounts. Jesus does a whole lot of fishing but not the disciples. They are learning. One time Jesus sends them out on a missionary journey, and they do some fishing. But other than that they are learning how to fish. Fishing for people is a whole lot more complicated than fishing for fish. The disciples have a lot to learn.

How well do they learn? The answer is not found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. The answer is found in the next book of the New Testament, the Book of Acts. The full name of Acts is The Acts of the Apostles. And there are a lot of good fishing stories in the Book of Acts. The Apostles, with the help of the Holy Spirit, have become wonderful fishers. As we read Acts, we discover that their focus on Jesus is beginning to pay off, and the Church is growing by leaps and bounds.

But what about fishing today? We too are called to fish for people. This is what one man had to say: "Who are the "fish" in our world, and what are they thinking? We need to know our audience, find out what they are searching for, what they believe, and what they WANT to believe.

"Is the Church speaking to their beliefs and answering their perceived needs? If not, we are being sloppy fisherfolk. Yet how many times have we in the Church missed just this point of adequately understanding the people we are called to catch for Christ? How often have we offered instead "the unnecessary to the unwilling" in our attempts to spread the Gospel? A wonderful story illustrates the point.

“One day a mother came home from work to find her two older sons sitting on top of their little brother – who was howling mad and crying. Asked to explain, the older boys said, ‘Well you see Johnny fell into the wading pool, and we are trying to give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The trouble is, he keeps getting up and walking away.’” Offering the unnecessary to the unwilling.

He continues, “One of the ... trends growing in sport fishing today is the practice of ‘catch and release.’ The premise behind catch and release is that the fish are more valuable in the water than on the angler’s dinner table. A Yogi Berra-ism might read: ‘it’s hard to catch fish that have already been eaten.’

“Jesus said to fish for people – not to ‘eat’ them. How do we ‘fish’ and not ‘devour’? Look to Jesus. He never coerced anyone into belief. He never chased after the rich young ruler. When some disciples took offense at his teaching about the ‘bread of life,’ Jesus never stopped them from leaving him. He called, and he released. The call of the Gospel is always a call to freedom.”

Commenting on the call of the four that we heard this morning, Reverend William Barnwell wrote: “What strikes me about the passage is not the sacrifice of the four disciples but rather their recklessness.” It does seem reckless no doubt about it. To simply drop everything and follow Jesus does seem reckless. When Abraham was called to leave his country and head for Canaan, he was at least able to take some family members and all his possessions with him. But here the call is simply to follow. But it isn’t only the disciples’ recklessness that we see in this passage. The Lord also seems to be taking a great risk. He must have perceived in these four fishermen the potential to fulfill his mission.

Jesus has seen this potential in millions down through the centuries. Today it is our turn. The question has been asked, “Are we also cut of this cloth – cups waiting to be filled – people gatherers who cannot bear to keep quiet because of the urgency of the message that has transformed our own lives?” Jesus is calling you and he is calling me. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote that “a mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimension.” Like the four fishermen of Galilee, by answering Jesus’ call, we will never be the same again. Halleluiah!