

“Fishing with Jesus”

Matthew 4:18-23

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Little Johnny was walking down the beach, and he saw a motherly-looking woman sitting under a beach umbrella on the sand. He walked up to her and asked, "Are you a Christian?" "Yes." she replied. "Do you read your Bible every day?" She nodded her head, "Yes." "Do you pray often?" the boy asked next, and again she answered, "Yes." With that he asked his final question, "Will you hold my quarter while I go swimming?" The purpose of following Jesus Christ as a Christian isn't just to be a nice and kind person to others, but to live out our lives with a purpose and a mission oriented direction by the guidance of God. Over the next two months, I will be preaching a new series about the 'purpose of church.' It will be a time to think about our vision and our direction for the future of our church. I hope that we can dream together. In the next few months, you will not only hear from me, but you will be hearing a new and fresh vision from Bria Stevens who came back from The Sing a New Song Conference for our 'reconciling' ministry, and you'll hear a lay person's voice for our church on Laity Sunday in October, and also, there will be a new start for our children and youth on Youth Sunday in October. I am excited that we can envision and dream together.

This morning, I want to talk about God's purpose for our church and to get clarity on our mission as a Christian community. Today's Scripture reading describes early Jesus' ministry and shows us how he started his new ministry by recruiting his new disciples. Surprisingly, the Gospel of Matthew gives us a short and concise report on his beginning process of formation of a new community: As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is Peter) and his brother Andrew (as we know, they were fishermen). Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." What happened was that they immediately left their nets, boat and even their father and followed Jesus Christ. What does it mean to follow Jesus? What does it require of us?

My friend decided it was time to talk to her bright four year-old son, Benji, about receiving Christ. "Benji, "she asked quietly, "would you like to have Jesus in your heart?" Benji rolled his blue eyes and answered seriously, "No, I don't think I want the responsibility." According to Bonhoeffer, a

theologian, Christians are people who are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. But this doesn't mean that since we don't have to work to be "saved", we don't have to do *anything*. He calls this "cheap grace." Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, the discipline of community. Cheap grace is grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ. He contrasts cheap grace with what he calls "costly grace," grace that is always connected to discipleship. "It is costly because it calls to discipleship; it is grace, because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. The gift of salvation can never be separated from the call to follow Jesus. Christians have the responsibility to follow Christ's vision." Now, in our text, Jesus calls disciples to join his new ministry with a vision and purpose. Peter and Andrew followed Jesus Christ's calling and immediately joined his new vision and movement for the new community

Before we revisit our Scripture, we need to know a little more about the background of our text in Jesus' times. As I shared with you a couple weeks ago, the Sea of Galilee is a large freshwater lake, about 7 miles wide and 13 miles "long." In the first century, the Sea of Galilee was also a well known harbor of the fishing industry. Along the shore, villages were connected with the local fishing industry. Now Jesus was walking by this lake when he envisioned forming the new community. Simon and Andrew were the first people that Jesus met, and they were fishermen. At that time, fishermen did not work in a "free market" economy. According to a social economic study, the fishing industry was state-regulated for the benefit of the urban political leaders. They were Greeks or Romans who had settled in Palestine following their military conquests, or they were Jews well-connected with King Herod and his sons. Everybody else was poor. Caesar and Herod benefited from the fishing trade in a variety of ways. For one thing, they sold the fishing leases which entitled local groups to fish in the sea. Fishing rights generally were awarded not to individuals, but to local "co-ops" based in kinship--like, for example, the brothers Simon and Andrew, and the Zebedee family. In addition, there were taxes on both the fish product and on the processing, as well as tolls on shipping and land transport. Fishermen were at the bottom of a very detailed economic hierarchy.

The fishing industry didn't give them any reason to dream or hope for the future. They were oppressed, marginalized outsiders. Jesus called them, and he suggested to them that they should dream a new dream. The new vision and the new community meant they were no longer instructed to catch fish anymore but to become fishers of people. This was a provocative and radical idea, but Simon and Andrew immediately left their nets, the boat and even their father-(who was the kinship in their business) and followed Jesus' ministry. This "new community" was not based on family or economic ties--quite the contrary, the

new community was based in Jesus. The disciples made a formal witness to Jesus' new vision for the world -the ones living in communion with Jesus and each other—they were to be the face of that vision in the world.

Jesus' new ministry was a clear vision which was “proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” The sickness and disease were not only physical illness, but they also involved the socio-economic systemic issues of the day and the emotional depression the people experience from the corrupted social system. Jesus needed committed people who would join this new vision for the new community. Clear purpose helps us to drive our energy and passion to a right direction. Whatever we do in our ministry, we need to be keenly aware of what we are doing it for.

When I researched purpose oriented ministry and mission statements, I happened to find Starbucks coffee company's mission statement at their homepage. It says, “to inspire and nurture the human Spirit - one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time.” Speaking of their philosophy on coffee, it says, “it has always been and has to be about quality. We are passionate about ethically sourcing the finest coffee beans, with great care for improving lives” Isn't this interesting? Even a coffee company has clarity on their mission statement. We must have a clear purpose and direction where we are and what we will do for the ministry of God in this world.

In our United Methodist Church, the Council of Bishops cast out a new vision and developed an action plan for our denomination envisioning the next decade early this year. I joined the conference; it challenges our local church saying we need "to redirect the flow of attention, energy, and resources to an intense concentration on fostering and sustaining an increase in the number of vital congregations effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." This reflects the reasons that we have been losing some part of our passionate hearts and enthusiasm for the fruitful ministry of church life. According to another report of the "Vital Congregations Research Project", out of 32,228 United Methodist churches in North America only 4,961 congregations, only 15 percent, are classified as "high-vital" congregations (in terms of attendance, growth over five years, professions of faith per member and annual giving per attendee.) Bishop John R. School of the Baltimore-Washington Annual (regional) Conference explains to us that a vital congregation should have five things in our church ministry: inviting and inspiring worship, engaged disciples in mission and outreach, gifted, equipped, and empowered lay leadership, effective, equipped, and inspired clergy leadership and small groups and strong children's programs and youth ministry

What about our church? Has our church been a purpose oriented church according to these five purposes? I am very proud that we are an inviting, welcoming and caring church, but at the same time, I have observed that there are some areas where we should place more effort to make our ministry more vital and thriving. For example, we need to strengthen our youth ministry and children's ministry and continue small group ministry opportunities for spiritual formation and building relationships. We need to continue crafting inviting and inspiring worship services and need to strengthen mission and service to our neighborhood as well.

Jesus compared his new ministry to fishing with him. Disciples must know what Jesus meant clearly in their context of their lives. Even though they worked hard, they were always poor because of systemic issues, but Jesus called them to join his new ministry for dreaming a life of fullness and abundance. It is not about our ministry, but it is about God's ministry for people. If you have gone fishing, you may know that it can be very boring if you don't catch any fish. But you have to be patient and wait. The time will come. Endurance, discipline and perseverance are needed for a successful turnout, but you must not be in despair nor give up. You must be patient for God's time for you.

We know that we cannot accomplish everything all at once, but the most important thing is that we know where to go with a clear sense of direction. Life and ministry is not a matter of speed but a direction. We are a reconciling congregation and our mission statement clearly shows that "our purpose is to promote the love of Christ, and nurture the spiritual growth for individuals, church and our community." I would like to add specific focuses to develop and to accomplish our mission statement. Those are "Connecting, Empowering, Thriving and Transforming." As a reconciling congregation, we will continue to emphasize "connecting" ourselves to the world, connecting ourselves to non-religious people to share the good news, "empowering" young people and making more effective leaders in this community to make more meaningful leadership. We will become a more "thriving" congregation through Spirit filled worship and engaging ministry, and finally we can "transform" this world through outreach ministry to serve our community, our conference and the world by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Amen.