

Reflection on the Word: January 21, 2018 Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62; Mark 1:14-20

There was a young boy who wanted to go down to the lake and fish, and his mother asked him to take his little sister along. But he protested vigorously, saying, "Mama, the last time she came with me I didn't catch a single fish."

The mother said, "Well, I will talk to her and I promise this time she won't make any noise."

The boy replied, "It wasn't the noise Mama, she ate all my bait."

No doubt, there are a number of reasons why people don't catch fish, and one writer has suggested these four:

(1) Some people are using the wrong bait.

(2) Some people are fishing in the wrong lake, that is, they don't know where the fish are.

(3) Some people have got the right bait and they're in the right lake, but they don't know how to fish.

(4) Then there are some people who have the right bait, and they're in the right lake, and they know how to fish, they're just not willing to go fishing.

In today's gospel, Jesus calls us to be fishers of people... to share good news, to welcome people into the community of faith, to grow God's kingdom.

And the prophet Jonah, who is best known for his running away from God's call and for the time he spent in the belly of a fish, in today's reading, is living out *his* response to God's call to go to the people of Nineveh with a word from God, so that they might repent and be saved.

Call and response ... that is what our focus is this morning.

And it's interesting to note that God can use even a most reluctant prophet, like Jonah, or seemingly ill-equipped disciples, like the fishermen Simon & Andrew, James & John, to do God's work in the world. God can and will use us, too, to proclaim the gospel message in word and deed ... if we will only open ourselves to hearing and responding to the call that is uniquely ours.

Let's go back to catching fish ... and to the reasons why people **don't** catch any. It could be said that our problem is not that we have the wrong lake. The water is full of fish. Research polls indicate that two-thirds of Canadians are spiritual while just half say they are religious. And a quarter of those who profess "no religion" still expressly believe in God.

The problem is not that we have the wrong bait. We have the gospel which can hook any fish. For people looking for meaning in life, the teachings of Jesus still hold hope and promise. But perhaps the church needs to find new ways of communicating the gospel. In his studies, sociologist Reginald Bibby has found that as many as 6 in 10 people who seldom attend worship services are open to greater involvement. However, research shows that they also need to find that church addresses their central

spiritual, personal, and relational needs – beginning with good ministry to their children. Until that happens, the gulf between spiritual/religious interests and involvement will persist.

Perhaps our problem is one of reluctance and apathy. There are many Christians who believe they do not know how to share the gospel's good news, that they do not have the necessary gifts or skills; and are reluctant to even try.

Either way, could it not be that Dr. R. G. Lee was right when he said, "The greatest sit-down strike in the world is in our churches, where those who claim to be followers of Jesus have never become fishers of people."

Jesus said, "Follow Me." Quite frankly, that is where the Christian life begins and ends—in following Jesus. Now literally what that says in the Greek language is: "Come behind Me." That is, "Get behind Me, fall into My footsteps, and do as I do." In other words, we are to follow Jesus just as a disciple follows his master.

Of course, we know that people ultimately cannot and will not follow a leader unless that leader deserves to be followed. But when we look at the essence of the life of Jesus, in comparison to that of many of our modern-day leaders, there is so much that compels us to follow him ... to make his values our own; to be compassionate as he was; to break down boundaries, to extend the circle of inclusion, to work for justice and peace, and to love - as he did.

The story is told that Billy Graham was in a certain town years ago, and he wanted to mail a letter, but he had no idea where the post office was. So he stopped a little boy walking the street and asked him if he could direct him to the nearest post office. The little boy said, "Yes sir, go down to the red light, turn right, go two blocks to the second red light, turn left, and you will be at the post office."

Dr. Graham thanked him and said, "Son, if you will come to the Convention Center this evening, you can hear me telling everybody how to get to heaven." The boy replied, "I don't think I'll be there mister, you don't even know your way to the post office."

For us, Jesus is the way ... he is our road map to life that is abundant and full, and the very first command He ever gave to any disciple was: "Follow Me." For that is where discipleship begins and ends - in following Jesus.

But today's gospel leads us beyond just following.

Jesus says: "I will make you become fishers of people." 'Following Jesus' is discipleship; 'fishing for people' is evangelism.

And though it sounds trite, it is true. If you are not fishing, you are not following. For the mark of following is fishing.

R. A. Torrey once said, "I would like to ask what right a man (and that goes for women too) has to call himself a follower of Jesus Christ if he is not a soul-winner? There is absolutely no such thing as following Christ

unless you make the purpose of Christ's life the purpose of your life."

The church has become for many of us, a pretty comfortable place to be. We come each Sunday and sit on padded pews; we sing some of our favorite hymns and hear a pretty decent message, then we go home and rest on our laurels until the next week when we go through the same routine again. But how often do we feel challenged to give in extraordinary ways, or to engage in life-changing mission? How often are we willing to step outside of our comfort zone in extending a welcome to a newcomer or sharing the gospel with those in our community and world who are crying out in need for love or sympathy or justice?

It's been said that the church exists for the fish who have not yet been caught. And it is our job to go out and find those fish, and to catch those fish, and to bring them in to the kingdom of God.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus calls the first four of his disciples. But if we were to look ahead to Mark chapter 3, we would read: "Jesus went up the mountain and called to Him those whom He wanted, and they came to Him. And He appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with Him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message." First, He called them and then He sent them. He called them in so that He might send them out. Do you know why? Fish do not come to the fishermen; fishermen have to go to the fish.

The apostle Paul, writing to the Romans, put it this way: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?"

Let's say we change the wording of that and apply it to fishing.

For whatever fish bites the bait of the gospel, shall be saved.

How can fish be caught without bait?

How can they bite the bait unless they see it?

How will they see it unless it is placed in the water?

How will the bait get into the water unless the fisherman goes to the lake?

We are all called to be fishers, and that fishing can happen in a variety of ways, big and small, when we are open to the opportunities that come to us.

I think of a woman who was playing tennis with her good, but quite secular, friends. In a conversation break between sets she was telling them about something she had read that had been particularly helpful. It would have been easy to say, "I read something this morning." Instead, with no attempt at being pious, she simply introduced one word: "In my devotional reading this morning." It was not a major soul-winning engagement. It was, however, a true sowing of seed. By a word, she had opened the door for some further conversation.

Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Church*, says: "Small ministries often make the greatest difference. The most important light in my home is not the large chandelier in our dining room, but the little nightlight that keeps me from stubbing my toe when I get up to use the bathroom at night. It's small, but it's more useful to me than the show-off light."

I am convinced that each of us is called – but individually, and often with the help of the community of the church, we need to find or discern our own particular calling. When I was nursing, I felt that was a calling – a ministry of compassion. But then, through my ongoing involvement in the church, I felt yet another calling – to full-time, ordained ministry.

Of course, not everyone is called into the ministry full time, but all of us are called to minister to one another whenever and wherever we are. Andrew and Peter were called from their nets and put them down to follow Christ. James and John, also, were called from their family trade and they gave up the love of their family for the love of another kind. You may be an Andrew, Peter, James or John, called from the nets of this workaday world, to focus your gifts in the ministry of the church.

But another Andrew today might be asked to pick up his nets and serve Christ in his boat. Another Peter today might be asked to stay and do his work in the market place. You might be a James or John of whom God asks to stay in the corporate world. There is a passage in Scripture where Jesus tells a man whom he has healed to go back home. The man begged Jesus to let him follow but he did not let him, "Go home to your family," said Jesus, "and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you."

That too is a very valuable ministry. With one's family and friends. The man who was healed was sent back to be a walking, living demonstration of what Christ can do for us. So how do you know what your calling is? One person expressed it this way: Your calling can be found at the corner of where *your* desires and the needs of the world intersect. It's like preacher Frederick Buechner says, in his book, *Wishful Thinking*.

He says: Our special mission in our life is usually

A. That which we'd love most to do and

B. It is work that the world most needs to have done.

And he concludes: "The place God calls us to, is the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Meeting people where they are. Speaking simple conversational words in soul-winning moments. Finding our calling. These are all marks of discipleship.

Recently, I came across a sermon title which I found intriguing. And I want to leave its thought with you this morning. "If you were arrested for being a Christian, would you be convicted?" We are today's disciples, and it is not an easy task. But the God who calls, also equips. Thankfully, our Lord gives us the strength to do the job which he has given us. The big question is: "What kind of disciple will