

“A Messy Vocation”

Mark 1.16-20

¹⁶ Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.
[ESV]

HOPE

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Fishing is a messy enterprise -- water everywhere; slimy, scaly skins; fins that can cut the hands; sliced-open bellies spilling innards everywhere and drawing legions of flies; smells you just can't adjust to and which enter the very fabric of your work clothes and announce your arrival long before you enter a room. Fishing is a messy vocation.

We'll look this morning at the setting for this messy vocation, the circumstances in which it was made and -- since "vocation" is both an occupation and a calling -- we'll look at the summons itself. When we get to the summons, we'll see that it divides into three further parts. It was there -- toward the end of the first part and rapidly gaining momentum through the second part ("Call to Service") that this sermon began to write itself and left me eager to hear it this morning.

I. Setting

As usual I have brought James Edwards with me to the pulpit, and he observes that "The first recorded act of Jesus' ministry in Mark is not something sensational -- a spectacular miracle or a mighty sermon -- but a simple summons of four [small business owners] into fellowship with himself." It's the Sea of Galilee [which Luke calls the Lake of Gennesaret], "a picturesque lake some seven miles wide and thirteen miles long at the extremities. Lying nearly seven hundred feet below sea level, the Sea is confined by" rather steep "mountains on the east and by somewhat gentler slopes on the west. Seen from the heights, the lake has roughly the shape of a harp." Some say that shape is the source for its Hebrew name -- Kinnereth ("violin"). Josephus [Jewish historian regarded as accurate chronicler] extols the Sea of Galilee for its pure sweet water and many species of fish, its fertile soil and pleasing climate that supplies fruit and produce ten months of the year. The whole region, he says, is one in which 'nature had taken pride.'"¹

We don't know exactly where along the shoreline Jesus called the four. The shoreline along Capernaum in the north-northwest is a mass of broken black basalt, which would have made it difficult for walking and beaching boats. Mendel Nun, acknowledged to be one of the leading experts on the Sea of Galilee (himself an experienced fisherman -- who died at age 92, BTW, just four months ago), places the call at Tabgha on the northwest shore two miles from Capernaum. Tabgha is also the traditional site of the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6. It's also known as "well of Capernaum" and is undoubtedly a popular fishing spot of the locals because of its famous "seven springs," which made a waterfall which would be a good place for fishermen to wash their nets. This would be a logical place to do "net maintenance" -- cleaning and repair, as James and John were doing.

II. Circumstances

The nets themselves were circular, "measuring some twenty feet in diameter and with heavy bars of metal or rocks attached to the perimeter. With practice and dexterity the

¹ James R. Edwards, **The Gospel According to Mark**, p. 48 (hereafter "Edw."). Edwards does not follow the older tradition of initially capitalizing the first letter of the third person singular masculine pronoun when it refers to a member of the Godhead. Although I prefer that tradition, I will, for the sake of minimizing reader confusion, adopt the contemporary practice of using all lower case letters even when I am not quoting Edwards.

casting net could be handled by a single fisherman who, either standing in a boat or, as is the case with Simon and Andrew here, wading out into the water, gathered the net on his arm and heaved it forcefully outward in a circular motion so that it would land like a parachute on the water, trapping fish as it sank to the bottom. Fish were retrieved by the fisherman diving to the bottom, gathering the weights of the net together, and dragging the net and its catch to shore."²

Play with this image: Simon and Andrew were "casting a net into the sea." Unless Jesus called them after the first cast of the day, they were wet from head to toe. And then the text tells us that "immediately they left their nets and followed him." No here like "Lord, let me first go and . . . [bury my father]." ^{Lk. 9.59}

"In the first century fishing was a thriving industry on the Sea of Galilee, which counted no fewer than sixteen bustling ports on the lake and several towns on the northwest shore, including Bethsaida ("house of the fisher") . . . and Taricheae ("salted fish"), named for the fishing trade. So numerous were fishing boats that Josephus was able to commandeer 230 of them during the war in Galilee in A.D. 68. Nor was the catch consumed by local markets alone. . . . [R]emember . . . that fish, and not meat, was the staple food of the Greco-Roman world. Fish from the Sea of Galilee were exported and prized in distant Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch in Syria. That fisherman in Galilee competed in the larger Mediterranean market testifies to their skill, prosperity, and ingenuity – and probably to their command of Greek, which was the international language of business and culture. The fishermen whom Jesus called were scarcely indigent day laborers. In order to survive in their market . . . , they needed to be – and doubtlessly were – shrewd and successful businessmen."³

What I've asked you to picture is not just a vaguely misty, beautiful sea/landscape but a real world scene after the fall. There's hard work taking place here -- anxious work. This, too, is one of the circumstances; it *always* is: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, . . ." ^{Gen. 3.19} This is the same anxiety Mr. Malone feels, Mr. Duntley feels, Mr. Shipman feels every day. Especially in the face of this anxiety, why should the four men leave what they know for the unknown? Yet . . . "immediately they left their nets and followed him."

III. Summons

The call to discipleship has three characteristics. First and foremost, Jesus is the *subject* of the call.⁴

A. Jesus the subject – We see him passing along the shore, where he sees the two pairs of brothers. He issues the summons, "Come, follow me." Was this the way itinerant first-century rabbis gained their pupils? Not at all. "There are no rabbinical stories analogous to the calling of the disciples, for rabbis did not consummate the teacher-student relationship by the summons 'Follow me.'" You got into a rabbinical school on your own initiative -- not by awaiting the call of a rabbi. "The personal

² Edw., p. 49

³ Edw. *loc. cit.*

⁴ Lengthy Edw. paraphrase taken from p. 49 *et seq.* begins here. Direct quotes are in quotation marks as usual.

prominence that Jesus assumes in the call of the four fishermen is highly unusual in Jewish tradition as a whole." Rabbinic students were faithful principally to the Torah rather than to a particular rabbi. [p. 50] There was practically no notion of a student's "following God." With what may be the sole exception of Elijah calling Elisha,^{1 Kings 19.19-21} we don't find in the OT a record of Moses or the kings or the various "men of God" or the prophets, as a rule, calling people to follow them. As happens so often in his earthly ministry, Jesus turns a social convention on its head by inviting the men to follow him.

But why should they? Why should these fishermen follow Jesus? He calls them . . . but gives them no reason – no argument why they should respond to the call. As Edwards puts it, "no miracles or debate or moral persuasion." The call to these four men is rooted solely in Jesus' messianic authority, and – though issued "in their world" – it is entirely unilateral (one-sided). Master Malone, you have experienced the "because I said so" response from one of your parents when you asked why you should do what they asked you to do. The call – the vocation here does not carry with it any of that tension. To give a reason is to invite reflection. Faith responds just to "Follow."

Unlike rabbinic wannabes, the four are not required to do anything – no "qualifying" exam in theology or quiz on the Torah – in order to become disciples . . . just "Follow me." And they do. Consider the drama here. Too much video leaves us with trite imaginations: Wide-eyed, slack-jawed and moving in slow motion, the four drop their nets and docilely follow Jesus.

But the drama *isn't* visual. It's spiritual. The four are putting themselves at risk. They've given up their livelihood. They don't even know where they'll lay their heads.^{Matth. 8.20} Theirs is a powerful act of faith. Edwards suggests (p. 50) that, in this act of following, the disciples show that faith must be an act before it is a belief with specific content. I agree with him this far: The four had to follow him before they could really know him.

But *did* they know him, at least a little bit, before they followed? John's gospel says that Peter and Andrew had some previous dealings with Jesus before they were called.^{John 1.35-42} Mark's text even vaguely supports that notion. "He saw *Simon* and *Andrew* . . ." not "He saw two men . . ." Be the author. Be Mark with his "lean language." How would you write it if the men he saw were strangers to him? Would you introduce them by name? I don't think so. I think that the introduction by names implies that Jesus had met these men (maybe in the situation described in John 1).

Here's the point: Mark's text clearly "anchors the call of the disciples solely in the authoritative"⁵ voice of Jesus. They hadn't gone in search of him; he searches for them. **Discipleship begins in their world.** "When Jesus as God's Son initiates human fellowship the encounter takes place not on his ground, or even on the holy ground of the synagogue or temple, but on their ground in the working world of boats and nets [and messy, stinky fish] and labor from dawn to dusk."⁶

⁵ Edw., p. 50

⁶ Edw. *loc. cit.*

"Follow me. Follow *me*." What can they do but respond to the word of Jesus, knowing . . . or sensing . . . or both that the summons is grounded solely in him as Messiah?

B. Call to service

The call to discipleship is also a call to service. "I will make you become fishers of men." I like "become." It clearly implies a process rather than an immediate investiture in an office. (NIV omits this important "become.")

It's a slow and painful process. It's hard to understand.^{8.14-21} Certain to attract persecution.^{13.13} Hard to remain on alert and on duty^{14.37} Easy to give up.^{14.50} In brief: MESSY.

The call to service is not just a call to labor but a call for a radically changed perspective: To look at all of the things of life from God's perspective rather than from man's perspective^{8.33} Only from that perspective can the disciples participate in and serve the kingdom.

Now, they didn't know any of this when they put aside their nets and followed. They didn't know that the One who had called them was the Suffering Servant who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.^{10.45} Did they know how Jesus would make them "become"? Would this be a traditional rabbinic course of instruction, despite the unconventional nature of their calling to become disciples?

"In the event," they would be taught by example; they would learn through PROXIMITY TO CHRIST. And the lessons would be costly. As already noted, they must leave not only their nets and their families, but also their entire way of life. They must undergo spiritual surgery, which Jesus dramatized in words quoted by Matthew: "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."^{Matt. 5.29-30}

They didn't know any of this when they put aside their nets and followed, and you didn't either when you acknowledged God's call on your life and received the gift of faith followed by repentance. Did you know that the call was also and essentially a call to community?

C. Call to community

Finally, all of the circumstances of the call suggest "that the essential work of Jesus consists in forming a fellowship, and that only within fellowship is the call of Jesus heard and obeyed. The community that Jesus forms is not a nameless and faceless mass, but a community of individuals whose names are known – Simon, Andrew, James, and John . . .⁷ Maren, Ernie, Marshall, Wendy, Jeanette, and others and others and others.

⁷ Edw., P. 51

And so here it was: The first act of Jesus' public ministry – calling four fishermen into community with himself so that they might become "callers" of others.

DOCTRINE: Christ calls His people into community to call others.

Let's do some "free association" of ideas as we apply this doctrine. As noted, fishing is a messy enterprise -- water everywhere; slimy, scaly skins; fins that can cut the hands; sliced-open bellies spilling innards everywhere and drawing legions of flies; smells you just can't adjust to and which enter the very fabric of your work clothes and announce your arrival long before you enter a room. Fishing is a messy enterprise.

Application to living in community in a fallen world – None of this is found in today's passage, but it is reflected in the rest of Mark's gospel. Living in community in a fallen world is a messy enterprise. Why? The central sin is denying dependency/asserting independency. Can you see how that immediately messes up community? In Genesis 3, God said, in essence, "You are dependent on me for life and to know what you may safely do." Adam said we are not -- we can make our own judgments. We keep doing what Adam claimed we could do despite our unbroken history – spread over millennia – of never getting it right when God says it's wrong.

(Free association continues) *Expectations* may be at the core of messiness: The fish expects food when striking lure/bait but gets the hook . . . or a nice, relaxed swim but gets the net. Put any two people together in any situation: work, home, school, church and what do you have? Two different sets of expectations.

Example: I think (like Adam) that I can independently determine what I need for happiness. So, in the little 2-person community which is our home, I expect Betsy to love me in a particular way; God made Betsy to love me in another. The book about "love languages" helps us understand: Hers is receiving gifts; mine is acts of service. I'd like her to serve me; she'd like to give me gifts and *vice versa*. That's a mess waiting to spread itself over our life together and ooze into every corner of our hearts. The two keys are for me (and for Betsy) to recognize that neither of us knows everything that's going on . . . that I don't even know my own needs rightly . . . and to ask God to love me through her and then to receive the love he offers – recognizing and rejoicing in the fact that God is the world's leading expert on loving me.

By abandoning nets and boats, the fishermen seemed to be giving Jesus a blank check. Not really. They had expectations about how the Son of God would treat them if they entered into community with him. But they didn't know everything. They didn't – we don't – grasp the full implications of the fall. Those implications are so profound – they so thoroughly frustrate our uninformed expectations – that we simply can't cope on our own.

We need a community in order to survive and thrive. Jesus is about to teach the four fishermen – and eight colleagues – what a community of Christ followers looks like and lives like. And sometimes he will even use words. Stay tuned. **Amen.**