

Faith Mennonite Church
January 27, 2008

Traits of Fishermen: More than the Smell

Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23

There's a lot of action in our gospel text this morning. It begins with a succession of events: John the Baptist is arrested. Jesus moves from Nazareth, where he was raised and where his family lived, to Capernaum, a fishing village, which would be the home base for his ministry. He begins to preach, announcing that the "kingdom of heaven has drawn near." He starts to call people to join what will become an itinerant community, and then sets out on the road, teaching and healing.

The gospel writer paints most of this picture in broad strokes, but he provides some detail about the first followers – they were fishermen with names: two sets of brothers, Simon (or Peter) and Andrew, James and John. James and John, we are told, were working with their father in their own boat, so we can assume that these men were from an established fishing family, part of the thriving fishing industry in this lake community.

Matthew says nothing about why Jesus chose fishermen, or why they dropped their nets so quickly to follow. Either this is Jesus' first miracle – that a group of men simply leave their livelihood and their families behind to follow a man who shows up one day with an offer to make them "fishers of men." Or, it is likely that word had begun to spread about Jesus, and these men, as they mended their nets and sat on the rolling seas, had been thinking about the meaning of life and wondering if there was something more they should be doing. When Jesus came by with a personal invitation to join him, they couldn't resist.

So who would you call to join you on a mission to express God's deepest love for humanity? Today we'd go for the communications consultant, the spiritual director, the human service workers, maybe the human resource specialists, and a few good IT people so we could get a flashy new website and a blog launched. Fishermen might not be on our list. (Reports from the MN DNR is that they're a declining group.) But they were on Jesus' list so it's worth taking a moment to ponder the traits of the fishermen.

"Fishermen" is one of those problematic, gender-exclusive words. Its gender exclusivity was probably accurate in Jesus' day, but today we know there are women who also enjoy the sport and work in the business. Nevertheless, I'm going to stick with the term fishermen, not to exclude any women in our midst who like to fish, but because all of the people I've thought of as I worked on this message, just happened to be men. (But I know we have at least one young fisherwoman in the making – Hannah O. – and sometime I hope, Hannah, that your fishing exploits will inspire another sermon!)

The first fisherman I knew was really a fisherboy – he was my brother, four years older than I. One of his first experiences in water was nearly fatal. When he was just 2 years old he and a friend wandered away from our backyard on a cold November day when he was in full snowsuit attire. They went down to the beach, just a block and a half from our house, and Rod tripped and fell face first into the water. When the neighbor boy couldn't get him out, he fortunately had the presence of mind to go get my mother. Providentially, when she carried his limp body to a nearby drugstore, someone was present who knew artificial respiration and was able to revive him.

He was too young to remember the experience or to develop a fear of water. Instead, as a young child he learned to fish and often as a youth chose spending a day alone walking and fishing trout streams over hanging out with his peer. Although rather quiet, he learned to know all the old fishermen in town and even the seasonal ones who just came for the whitefish run in the spring. He had a way of entering into conversation around their shared love – fishing. I guess I'd name this the trait of solitary camaraderie, the fisherman's ability to be alone and yet also form deep connections to

others. This was something that Jesus practiced and looked for in his followers: the ability to take time to commune with the divine—to pray—but also to move with the crowd, especially those who may be relatively unnoticed and on the margins of the community.

My father was also a fisherman, especially in his retirement years. His first boats were fairly small, safe for inland lakes and protected bays. He loved to get up before dawn and watch the sunrise over the bay as he trolled for fish and listened to the loon calls. Finally around age 80 he decided it was time to start expanding his horizon and go out for larger fish in Lake Superior, so he bought a larger, lake-worthy boat. Now his fishing trips started later in the morning, after he could hear the weather report, view the lake, and find a friend to go along. Fishing was as much about the weather and lake conditions as about the fish themselves. But risk can never be totally averted unless we remain entirely sheltered. Lake conditions sometimes change; unexpected waves overpower us. In choosing fishermen, Jesus was choosing people who were trained to be careful, to read the signals and the changing breezes, yet people who also understood the power of wind and water, who could weather the storm and keep rowing against the tide and furious winds of opposition.

Since moving to Minnesota, my husband has begun to fish. Having grown up in an academic and pacifist family that eschewed any use of guns and had no interest in hunting or fishing, he has had to start entirely from scratch. He's read books (like all good academics do!) and gone fishing with the more expert and experienced, but it's been a long exercise of patience and persistence. Sometimes the fish simply don't bite. Jesus was looking for disciples, not with slick resumes detailing all of their successes, but ones who would continue to cast their lines and nets, continue to believe in people and God's love for people even when the world seemed to be falling apart and others didn't seem interested in taking the hook of Jesus' message.

Finally, have you ever known a fisherman who couldn't tell a tale to make up for a bad fishing day? Jesus needed followers with imagination, with the capacity to see a kingdom of light breaking in upon a world in darkness. The writer of Matthew and the community of first-century believers that he was part of, firmly believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah that promised hope following a period of desolation and exile. When Jesus began his ministry, Israel was again in a time of darkness, of deep messianic longing. But the popular hopes weren't always met by Jesus' actions or message. He needed his closest followers to be people who could develop a new vision, see a new picture of God's work in the world. It wasn't easy. The gospels tell us that the fishermen were tempted by the traditional big fish narrative – that the Messiah would come militarily and mightily crush the occupying forces. But Jesus had faith that these men of imagination would come to see and experience the self-giving, sacrificial love that is at the heart of God.

Jesus didn't surround himself exclusively with fishermen and we don't make fishing a required part of our catechism or spiritual disciplines. And when Jesus calls disciples, then and now, to "fish for people" he is not calling us to hook or net people against their will. We are rather called to practice the traits of the fishermen:

- To balance our time of solitude and prayer with our times in community and relationship
- To read the signs of the times and be willing to take risks,
- To be patient and persistent with ourselves and others, and
- To be imaginative – looking for the signs of Christ's presence in our lives and the lives of those around us.

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