

## A Fish Story

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### 1. OccupyMN and the Gospel

A few months ago, I took my son Jonas to OccupyMN. It was an exciting time. People were beginning to realize that corporations rule the world. But there was—and still is—hope that things could change. It is an exciting time. But a perilous time.

Our world seems to be near the brink. The US economy is suffering, but the poor and the middle class are experiencing most of that suffering. The wealthy are somehow, through it all, continuing to maintain their wealth. In fact, banks are as profitable as ever.

Since most US American Christians separate faith from politics and economics, the church, for the most part, isn't involved the protests. But what does the way of Jesus have to do with economic discontent?

Apparently, not much. Christians may be known for their charity, but it is rarely accused of being prophetic.

In the early days of the OccupyMN protest, the clearest example of a Christian was a man wearing a poster board calling the protesters to “Repent.” With megaphone in hand, he spoke words of condemnation. He even wore a nifty red hat printed with the words “Cover Your Breasts.” In a crowd filled with the discontent, the unemployed, and the desperate—those struggling against a society that has been enslaved by corporate greed, this man's biggest concern was, apparently, uncovered breasts.

When we hear words like “repent” our minds are probably more likely to go to that guy, hurling words of judgement. Any “news” that guy had to share probably wasn't good.

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When Jesus started his ministry, he began with a call to repentance too. He said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

**But what is this good news?** Is it that this “kingdom of God” has come near? What the heck is the Kingdom of God? I mean, people throw around language like “repent” and “good news” and “kingdom of God” all the time. To many Christians—perhaps most—the Kingdom of God is ignored or it is simply another word for heaven. Repent is feeling bad about your sins. And the Good News is that you can go to heaven when you die. And all of this is possible because Jesus died and rose from the dead.

That's the standard “gospel” right? Freedom from sin and a heavenly rescue? Perhaps, if we're progressive, we might have a different Gospel, one that is focused on loving each other. But, all too often, it is a vague love.

It seems that, for the most part, what folks mean by the “Good News” of the “Kingdom of God” is something largely irrelevant to our lives in the here and now. It is often wishful thinking for a happy afterlife or a half-hearted call to love each other.

Does the Gospel, the “Good News” of Jesus have anything to say to our tangible struggles? Is Jesus' message to folks upset about imperialism, corporatocracy, social alienation, oppression, injustice, and exclusion to “cover your breasts?” Or does Jesus have actual good news for us this morning?

## 2. Read the Passage: A Fish Tale

In today's Gospel reading, we are told that, after, John the Baptist was arrested. Jesus comes to Galilee to start preaching. He approaches some fishermen. These weren't dirt poor fishermen—they were, relatively speaking, prosperous. They were working the family business. They were doing well enough to have some hired hands. Not rich, but the respectable sort of peasants.

We don't really know if they knew Jesus or not. But we know that after Jesus talks to them, they pretty much give up their livelihood.

When have you felt so stirred that you've taken that kind of risk?

When I was 19, I quit my crappy job working minimum wage at a grocery store and moved 200 miles for the love of a woman. Now, comparatively speaking, these fishermen had a lot more to lose than I did. So what Jesus offered must have been pretty dang impressive. What did Jesus say or offer that was so compelling that they'd leave behind their livelihood in the midst of scarcity?

Did he offer them a happy afterlife? I don't think so. It is likely they already thought they had that covered.

**Here's what Jesus says. Jesus makes the following statements:**

a) **Time is fulfilled.** Apparently, after John the Baptist is arrested, Jesus knows it is time to act. Where John stayed in one place, Jesus would begin an itinerant ministry. Jesus was upping the stakes. It was a risk, but apparently one that Jesus thought was worth it.

b) **God's kingdom has come, and it is near.**

In the context of Roman occupation, with wicked King Herod installed as a puppet king, with the entire Temple system in cahoots, Jesus begins to preach an alternative. The entire social, economic, political, and religious system was rigged. Jesus was proclaiming an alternate kingdom, an alternate society. God's society, the revolution of God.

c) Because it is near, **you need to repent.** And you need to believe the good news.

The idea here isn't to "feel bad" in the language of exile, Repenting meant going home. It meant return.

**Jesus is saying, "hey, you know Roman society. You know the Temple system. You know occupation. But God's society is here. It is time to come home."**

But that wasn't what made them drop their nets. It was what he said next: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

## 3. Fishers of People

I grew up hearing that this being "fishers of men" was a metaphor for evangelism. But it doesn't seem that Jesus is calling them to be mere missionaries. After all, the fishing metaphor isn't used as a missionary metaphor elsewhere like you'd suspect. Not in Peter's writings. Not in Paul's writings. Not in Acts. If Jesus' first missionary call was with a nifty metaphor like fishing for people, you'd think it would stick.

Where is the fishing metaphor used?

**Being the Jewish prophet he was, Jesus understood what the image of fish meant in the Hebrew**

**holy writ.** He knew the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “I am now sending for many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall catch them” – meaning, the prodigal leaders of Israel! The prophet Amos conveys judgment upon the rich by suggesting they will be hooked like fish, and the prophet Ezekiel speaks judgement against Pharaoh by saying “I will put hooks in your jaws and make the fish of your streams stick to your scales”. Could it be, as Ched Myers provocatively observes that “taking this (fish-hooking) mandate for his own, Jesus is inviting common folk to join him in his struggle to overturn the existing order of power and privilege”?<sup>3</sup> **One way or the other: proclaiming the Good News—the task of evangelism, as Jesus seems to be advocating, is inseparable from social justice action.**

In the prophets. In Jeremiah, in Amos, and in Ezekiel.  
(*Jeremiah 16:16*) (*Amos 4:1-2*) (*Ezekiel 29:3b-4*)

When you catch a fish, life cannot go on as before. It is fatal to the fish. This isn't a metaphor like shepherds or laborers. This is a death the the old way.

Thus we have here not just a call to discipleship and learning, but a call to a mission. It was a call to a nonviolent revolution. And, thankfully, we learn in other passages that even the big fish—the wealthy, have the opportunity to join the revolution.

#### **4. The Gospel Vision: Fishers of a New Society**

The compelling vision Jesus offered was this: that the old way of doing things—the Roman order with all of its crony imperialism and corruption, where even religion (which should be about liberation) has become a tool of oppression, is on its way out. God's society is near. **Now is the time. Join me, and you will no longer be fishermen. I will make you into revolutionaries.**

And this is, after all, what Jesus did. He went out and challenged the powers through audacious acts of love. Love that confronted the system in all of its un-love. Love that liberated and offended. He named names. He revealed exploitation.

The captives were to be released. The blind given sight. The oppressed were to be liberated. The Year of the Lord's favour (the Jubilee) was to be proclaimed – God's redistributive economic order.

Jesus' call to become “fishers of people” was a call to join Jesus in his nonviolent revolution to overthrow the current order of things. And if you were a handful of ancient near eastern palestinian fishermen, apparently a real promise of change was worth the risk.

**Here's my question: Is this still our call? Is Jesus still saying, here, in our midst "God's society is here...repent from the American Dream. Drop what your doing. Let's go fishing."**

Our world is still filled with brokenness. There are many places where the Kingdom of God—God's society—seems so far away. Things aren't the way they're supposed to be.

**But it doesn't have to be this way. The Gospel call invites us into a new way.**

With Jesus, there is good news. We can challenge the ruling order of our day and bring the love of Christ in clear and tangible ways into the broken places.

**Jesus is calling us to fish for the powers-that-be.**

Can we imagine a society (like the church in early Acts) where there are no poor or where there are no rich. Even if we could imagine such a society, would we really be interested in living in it? Are we willing to let go of our comfort to start reshaping, here and now, our relationships.

Where does it begin?

It begins with seeing the first step—that net dropping moment. That choice or series of choices that cause us to recognize and invest in the humanity of others rather than to live at the expense of others. The choices to invest in God's society rather than the American Dream.

For me, one of these moments came the first time we extended hospitality to a guest.

- ^ treating our money as though it isn't our own, rather it is to be spent on justice peace and love
- ^ it means receiving hospitality from others...learning to be more interdependent as we share God's abundance with one another
- ^ it means living simply and sustainably, so that there is more to go around
- ^ it means speaking prophetically in challenge to those things in the world that dehumanize, commoditize, and enslave.

Wherever it begins, with whatever decisions or changes in our lives, our call is not that different than the call that Simon and the others heard that day along the shore of Galilee: to reject the current order, to believe another way is possible, and to cast our lot in with God's revolution.

**Are we still standing by the boats. Clinging to the old world? Or are we willing to drop the nets, and live into our new job description?**