

From the Pulpit
Salem First Presbyterian Church

Casting a Wider Net

Matthew 4:12-23

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Until fairly recently, it was not uncommon for people to begin work with a given firm, and to continue with the same company until they were given the ruby pin, or the gold watch on retiring. But in the present economy, researchers tell us that it's likely a majority of people whether by choice or necessity will have a second career at some stage.

When I was dean of a seminary in Melbourne, I was surprised to learn that most of our ministry students were in their 40's and 50's. They had begun their careers in teaching or business or law, and only later responding to the call some of them had been putting off for many years.

In our gospel reading for today, we have the story of Jesus beginning his ministry, which was something of a second career for him. Trained as a carpenter, there is a Pre-Raphaelite painting of Jesus at work in his father's workshop.¹ If you look closely, you see that **Jesus has cut his hand on a nail, prefiguring the crucifixion** he would later suffer. It is a reminder that his life will have an impact far beyond his hometown of Nazareth.

As we hear the story, there is a hint of what was the turning point for Jesus, how he came to start his ministry. He had had news that John the Baptist had been arrested by the authorities. People like John are always **suspect for their manner as much as their message**; he was calling for a new way of living, and was seen as a threat by those happily ensconced in the present system.

Jesus would have been saddened by John's arrest. He and John were related through their mothers, who were cousins. There is another painting that depicts John and Jesus together as children, John a stocky toddler already wearing his trademark clothing made of skins, and Jesus a younger baby, with deep wisdom in his eyes.²

It is intriguing that as Jesus begins his ministry, his first message is the same as John had been preaching, "Repent, (that is, turn and live from a new perspective) for the kingdom of heaven has come near." In this way, Jesus took up the message of John. But (as Matthew suggests), **he did more than proclaim the new era, he in himself inaugurates the new era.**

Jesus left his family and the familiarity of Nazareth, and struck out into the unknown. First, he went to Capernaum, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. The people there had been overrun by powerful enemies, left in the wake of war, like some in our day. Jesus started there,

¹ "Christ in the House of His Parents" (1850) is a painting by John Everett Millais.

² "The Virgin, the Baby Jesus and St. John the Baptist" by Adolphe-William Bouguereau, another of the Pre-Raphaelites.

to fulfil the promise of one who would come “as **light to those who walked in darkness.**” And there is a note of hope for us here, that when we may feel life is dark in the aftermath of trouble or turmoil, Jesus comes and gives light to those in darkness, that they may see their way into a new future. By faith, we believe this good news is for us as well.

Next, Jesus begins to call disciples around him. They would one day sow the seeds of Christ’s kingdom, and thereby have a hand in transforming the world. But for the time being, they were fishermen. I can’t read this story without it calling to mind my father’s fishing trips when we were children. Each summer, he and his brothers would go to lakes in northern Canada and come home with huge Northern Pike and lake trout. They would come back after a week, unshaven and a bit disreputable. It was the custom to offer the wives a “peace offering,” a gift from a shop on the way home, perhaps an Inuit carving or a crystal dish. These gifts, as the story goes, would sometimes be offered through the front door on their return; only then would they, laden with a week’s dirty clothes, be offered entry back into the home.

The fishermen called by Jesus, Peter and Andrew, James and John, they were not just sport fishermen; fishing was their livelihood. They would get up early, go out into the dawn, and catch what they could. Into their usual routine, Jesus came with a stark challenge. “Follow me,” he said, “and I will make you **fish for people.**”

What did he mean? It’s an odd image; to fish for people. We can take it several ways. One of the things Jesus implies is that **life is more than just our livelihood**, just putting food on the table. If life holds only getting up, going to work or study, coming home tired and turning on TV, in the end there will be a sense, **shouldn’t there be a bit more to life than this?** In that haunting question, we hear Jesus’ call to cast a wider net. To the disciples who knew fishing, he said, come and fish for people. To us, he comes and calls us to use what we already know—as they used their fishing—our talents and abilities—to serve him and his people.

A mother whose children are grown may discover a calling to minister to youth. I remember in my junior high years, our church youth director was in many ways not the stereotypical youth leader. She was in her 50’s, warm and caring, a little matronly. But she loved us into the kingdom, listened to us, and quietly gave a sense of worth in those awkward years of coming into our own.

A musician may find he is called to give his gift of music in a church where people are sustained week to week by the gospel in song. A woman who has known the dark night of the soul may find she is called to share deeply with others as a prayer guide or spiritual director, leading them through the valley where she herself has walked. Christ calls us to cast a wider net, to use what we have experienced, to follow him.

Today, we will ordain and install new Elders and Deacons as leaders in our congregation.³ Ordination in our tradition has to do with where a person’s gifts meet the needs of the church,

³ In the Presbyterian church, those ordained to these positions are ordained for life, so once an Elder, always an Elder, whether or not someone is presently serving on the Session, and likewise for Deacons.

and the community. Frederick Buechener spoke of calling as **where your heart's deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger**. You might think of where that is for you.

Christ comes to you as he did to the fishermen, inviting you to cast a wider net, to deepen your involvement with people. He comes and calls, and beckons us each to find a way to answer him. Some among us may volunteer to hold what one woman calls the “arm babies” in the nursery here at church, some who like to read may tutor a child in reading. Some who have a heart for those whose lives have been hard, dedicate themselves to building Habitat houses or volunteering with the Hospitality network. Others may hear a call to serve as a Stephens minister, a pastoral caregiver, reaching out to those in grief or loneliness.

Another thing “fishing for people” implies is **gathering people into the kingdom**. Fred Craddock in one of his commentaries, has a bit of dry humor on whole idea of fishing for people. He says, “when pressed to yield details of the church’s mission,” this metaphor of fishing for people, “becomes rather unattractive.”⁴ We don’t want to think of hooking people or landing people for Jesus. Perhaps drawing people into the fold, as sheep and shepherd is a more comfortable metaphor. But fishing is what the first disciples knew.

As a church, this idea of casting a wider net bears some thought. It’s not just a question of looking for people to fill the pews in the first instance. It’s a question of our calling to **share the good news that God has more for us all than just the daily routine**.

If we are called to fish for people, to bring people into the net or the fold of God, how do we go about this? Sometimes it means **taking the initiative to invite someone to come along to church**, to an upcoming concert here, perhaps, or a class. There are a lot of reasons we don’t tend to do this. Yet if we find a sense of value and balance for our lives here, if we find a place to lay our burdens down and to encounter the divine, perhaps we can overcome our hesitation and offer to share our life here with a friend as well.

You may remember a point in your life when you were new to a community. Perhaps doing a bit of church shopping, trying to see if the neighbours would be welcoming. I sometimes wonder who are the people around us in our community, who are at that point in their lives, where an offer to take in a class or an evening at choir, might **help them find a place to belong**?

So what do we do with this story of the call of Christ? **How do we fish for people?** That depends a bit on where we are in life. For the students among us who still have a chance to shape what they will do with their lives, it is a challenge--be sure you look for a way to devote your life and energy **not just to making a living, but to making a difference**, whatever way you can.

For those in their working years, some may hear the radical call of Christ, to “leave your nets and follow,” to choose a new vocation. Others may not change their work, yet still hear the call to include something *beyond* work in the months ahead, to **find deeper fulfilment in living beyond yourself**, serving God and God’s people.

⁴ *Preaching through the Christian Year*, Year A, Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1992, p. 94.

And for those who are retired, it is a reminder that these years can bring a freedom to answer the call of God you may have felt through the years, to cast a wider net of interests and friendship, and **sustain others with care and encouragement.**

We have heard the story of the call of the disciples many times. **May God give us the courage to *respond*** to Christ's call, to leave our nets, and follow him.

Let us pray:

O Lord, guide each one of us to where you would have us serve. Help us to see the ways we can love and serve your people in some tangible way this week. And may we find life abundant and full in serving and loving you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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