

Third Sunday of Epiphany
January 25, 2009
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The lessons for today present themes of God's reign in our lives and the call to mission by bearing witness to our faith. Most of us know the story of Jonah from Sunday School. God calls Jonah to go to the Assyrian city of Ninevah to cry out against the sinfulness of the people. Jonah tried to escape God's call by getting on a ship going in the opposite direction. A storm comes up, tossing the ship about and the crew determines that Jonah is the reason they are in peril. Jonah is thrown overboard and swallowed by a great fish. Two days later Jonah is spewed out on dry land.

God calls a second time and this time Jonah answers. We are told Ninevah is a great city, it takes Jonah three days just to walk the length of the city. Jonah warns of the wrath of God that is about to be brought down upon the people of this city for their sinfulness. To Jonah's surprise, the people listen to him, repent and turn from their evil ways. God decides not to destroy the city.

In this story we see that God's nature is to be merciful. Jonah, like many of us, was not sure he was up to the task of God's calling. He tried to get out of responding by going another way. It took some persuasion on God's part to get Jonah to go be the witness God called him to be.

Not so Simon, Andrew, James and John in the Gospel of Mark. Their response to Jesus' calling was immediate and positive. Jesus is walking by the sea of Galilee when he has a chance encounter with these four fishermen. He invites them to come with him and be fishers of people. Jesus invited them to learn from him and to help to shape the first community of believers. Mark tells us that these fishermen immediately left their nets and followed him.

Ordinarily you would not expect commercial fishermen to just drop their nets, leave their profession, forget their boats and go off after an itinerant teacher. Nor would you expect James and John to leave their father in the care of hired hands. The idea we have of this call is that these men ceased being catchers of fish to become something else - fishers of people. But did the disciples spend every minute with Jesus? Did they cease being engaged in their professions, leave home and family to spend time following Jesus around? That is a good question.

Many of the stories recorded about Jesus begin with him calling the disciples together or sending for them. It is safe to assume that the twelve disciples spent a great deal of time with Jesus but the gospel stories do not imply that they were constantly by his side every minute of every day. There are many times when Jesus is alone. In Luke's gospel there is the story of Peter fishing all night and catching nothing. He is feeling very frustrated. Jesus appears on the shore and tells Peter to put the boats out again. Peter wants to know why if he has caught no fish he should go out again but he obeys Jesus. When he did as Jesus instructed his nets were filled with fish. Notice that Luke implies that Peter continues his fishing profession.

I doubt that Peter grew frustrated traveling around following Jesus and so he went back to fishing. It is even more doubtful that Jesus gave Peter the day off. What is more likely is that Peter and the others continued from time to time to be fishermen who followed Jesus. Remember the Gospels are not complete historical accounts of Jesus' life rather writings many years later so the followers of Jesus did not forget the stories about Jesus.

I think there is something important in this story for you and me. We like the disciples are called to follow Jesus. That call is a call to total commitment. Total commitment does not mean we give up our calling to serve as teachers, bankers, lawyers, homemakers, doctors, nurses, office workers, police officers, community builders or whatever. It means instead that our various professions take on new meaning because what we do is part of our calling. At times, like this one, we are the disciples gathered. We come together around the Lord's table, in service to others, to learn and grow as a community of believers. However, we are also the disciples scattered as we pursue the various vocations to which we have been called.

For many years Christians seemed to feel that making a total commitment to follow involved becoming a priest, a deacon, a nun or a monk. Sometimes this call to total commitment does lead one to discern a call to ordained ministry; but for the majority of us this call to total commitment means we remain a teacher, a doctor, a farmer, a fisherman. What we do as our livelihood takes on a different meaning because we have answered the call to follow and to be witnesses to Christ.

A month ago we heard the Christmas story. Remember the shepherds in the field keeping watch over their flocks by night? They were bathed in light and saw angels who spoke to them of the birth of the Messiah. The shepherds became excited at this

news decided to travel to Bethlehem to see this wonder that had come to pass. Perhaps they were bored watching the sheep. Perhaps the loneliness, the routine, the responsibility was getting to them. So, with an enthusiasm and sense of hope they went to the stable to see what the angels told them. There they found the child and worshiped him. What happened next?

The Gospel writers do not say for sure, but I expect they went back to the hillside, back to the sheep, back to the routine, back to responsibility. As sure as I am standing here before you, they went back as changed men. They did their jobs from that day forward as men who had seen the Savior.

We are in the Epiphany season. Major players in this season of the church year are magi who follow a star to find the Christ child. They brought him gifts and received the gift of being in his presence. The story says they went back to their own country a different way. They went back as changed men for they had seen the Savior.

Peter, Andrew, James and John, shepherds, kings - all were with Jesus and all had lives made new by him. We can too!

We are called by Christ to be witnesses, followers, fishers of people, vehicles of God's love. We are called to tell the story of Jesus and his glory, to sing praises and offer prayers. We are called to be his presence to all whom we meet. This vision and calling makes routine jobs come alive. It gives our lives meaning and our daily routine purpose. It provides hope where there is frustration and despair.

Jesus said to Peter, Andrew, James and John he would make them fishers of people. What did he mean by this? Jesus invited these fishermen to use the same skills, the same patience and courage it took to fish in pursuit of catching people by telling the story and inviting others to share the call. It is really that easy. The first thing a fisherman decides is where to fish. Where are people hungry for the love of God?

It is most likely that the majority of hungry people you encounter will be far away from these church buildings. They are the people you meet at work, in service organizations, on boards, at the gym or while traveling. Hungry people will approach those they feel have something to offer.

A holy man camped out on the edge of a village as night fell. A villager came to him and said, "God told me in a dream to come at dusk to the edge of the village. There I will find a holy man who will give me a stone that will make me rich."

The holy man thought for a while and then reached in his bag and pulled out a stone.
"You must mean this one. I found it on the forest path a day or so ago."
The man looked at the stone in wonder. It was a diamond as big as your fist.
He took the diamond home. All night he tossed and turned on his bed. At dawn he
returned with the stone to the holy man. "You decided you do not want the stone?"
"Please give me what you have that made it possible for you to give me this diamond
so easily."

You have a precious stone in your possession. Answer the call - be fishers of people.
Be alert of the call of the Master to come together to celebrate God's love for you as a
part of this community of faith. When you are scattered - cast your line deep and fish
for people - not for your sake, but for their sake and God's sake.