

SERMON TITLE: "Called to Fish for People"

SERMON TEXT: Mark 1:16-20

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: February 4, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a fishing family. My dad loved to fish, my mom liked to fish, and my two brothers thought fishing was essential to their quality of life. In northwestern Montana, where my family lived, there's water everywhere, so we had no shortage of places we could go. Our family didn't have a boat, so we didn't sit out on a lake to do our fishing. We usually fished along a creek or river, or occasionally we'd hike to a high mountain lake and fish along the shore. I can remember one time when our family hiked into Granite Lake and camped there overnight. My two brothers and I had a great time catching fish after fish after fish in the little creek that flowed out of the lake. Those cutthroat trout weren't very big, but they tasted wonderful cooked over the campfire.

I think I remember that Granite Lake experience with special fondness because my fishing successes were so rare. While the rest of my family enjoyed fishing, I never seemed to get the hang of it. My line was always and forever tangled in some bush above the water or hooked on some log or roots below the water. Or I was bored because I wasn't catching anything. Usually, I found it more satisfying to look for frogs or to find a sunny spot and read a book. When I was old enough to stop going on those family fishing trips, I did. My interests had shifted. Instead of going fishing on Sundays, I started going to church.

What happened is that a sixth-grade classmate of mine had invited me to go to church with her. Kelly's church was having a Sunday School contest. If she brought a friend, Kelly could win a prize. I was glad to find out that, as a visitor, I could win a prize too. I think I got some little gift right away, and if I came back enough Sundays in a row, I could pick something even better from the prize table. Apparently, that was enough bait for me. Within a short time, I was hooked. I enjoyed my Sunday

School class and the worship services. I enjoyed being there with other friends my age. I enjoyed learning about God and Jesus.

Going to church was a lot different than going fishing, but I discovered that they talked about fishing at church too. They were casting out nets and lines and lures, trying to pull in a catch. Only, at church, they were fishing for people. They were hoping to entice and snag some followers for Christ. Those people in that church knew well the story of Jesus calling Simon, Andrew, James, and John. The people in that church knew they too were called to fish for people.

1—EVANGELISM IS GOOD NEWS

Last Sunday we talked about how Jesus called his followers to receive healing, to celebrate God's grace, and to learn new things. Those were essential tasks for his disciples, and an excellent way to respond to their calling. Today, we're reading some earlier verses from the Gospel of Mark, and we see this call from Jesus worded a little differently with a slightly different emphasis. Here we perceive Jesus calling his followers to invite others to come along with them and join them in a life of faith.

This call to fish for people is often referred to as "evangelism." "Evangelism" is a scary word to many people. Some folks even have a hard time pronouncing it. But evangelism shouldn't be a difficult concept. It ought to be a blessing to us and to others. The word "evangelism" comes from a Greek word that means "good angel" or "messenger of good news." Evangelism means sharing the good news of our Christian faith.

If we back up to Mark 1, verses 14 and 15, we see that Jesus went to "Galilee, proclaiming the *good news* of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the *good news*.'" Jesus wasn't born to bring bad news to the world. Remember John 3:16? God sent his son because God so loved the world. Jesus came to bring healing, the joy of God's grace, and opportunities for positive change and improvement.

I think sometimes we Christians have failed to be fishers of people because we haven't had the right sense of purpose. We've been misled to think that evangelism is about condemnation. We've thought that evangelism meant convincing people that they were on their way to hell if they didn't shape up. We've thought that evangelism meant telling others that the way they lived was wrong, and thus alienating our friends and neighbors. So, we have most often kept our thoughts to ourselves, because we've not wanted to be the messengers of that kind of bad news.

Yes, it's true that Jesus did call people to repent of their sins, and Jesus did speak with urgency. Like John the Baptist before him, Jesus wanted the people to respond quickly so they could join him in his work. But Jesus' emphasis wasn't on the bad news side of things. Jesus' ministry was about healing and transformation. Jesus' message was about the reign of God which would offer a new, more abundant way of life. So, when we follow our call to fish for people, we can do it with a smile on our faces and joy in our hearts. We're talking about good news!

2—GOOD NEWS FOR THIS LIFE

Another reason many Christians have been reluctant to follow the call to fish for people is that they think the pay-off is in a distant heavenly future. Why take the risk of talking with people about their faith now, when the reward is so abstract and far away? Let me address that concern in a couple of ways. One is to say, yes, heaven will be great after we die. For us, for our loved ones, and for everyone in the whole world—an afterlife with God would be a wonderful outcome. But, as great as heaven may be after we die, most fish will be hooked with a more immediate kind of reward. Jesus called fishermen to fish for people using present-day realities. Our motivation for being Christians, and our motivation for sharing the good news, is that life is improved right now.

Ever since Jesus called the first disciples, Christianity has emphasized the benefits of education and healthcare. Thousands and thousands of people flocked to Jesus because he healed the sick, fed the multitudes, and taught them about God in a compassionate way that they could understand. When the

going got tough, many abandoned him, to be sure. But the Christian faith wouldn't have continued for all these 2000 years if millions and billions of people hadn't experienced real life benefits in following Jesus. All around the world, Christian people have established schools, hospitals, and food banks that have enhanced people's quality of life.

Here at Ogden First United Methodist Church, you know that we've been in ministry with Cuban immigrants. We've been sharing good news with Yainier and Yusimi who worship here with us. We've also been caring for their family members Cristian, Yisel, and Alisson in Cuba. And we've been assisting Yusimi's 24-year-old son Maikel who has made his way to Mexico City, where he now awaits the next step in his immigration process.

Our church is not alone in this ministry of sharing good news with immigrants. On Friday, I read an article about the Holy Trinity Methodist Church in Apaxco, Mexico. About 65 miles north of Mexico City, this church has opened its doors to migrants who are passing through. About 10 years ago, the congregation began feeding small numbers of people they noticed on the street outside their church. Later, they remodeled their building so they could shelter migrants inside. Their ministry to migrants has grown rapidly. They began this past year with the expectation of helping 100-150 migrants per month. Then in September, shelter volunteers assisted 500. In October, 1000 migrants received assistance. In November, the number climbed to 3000. By December, the Methodist church shelter was housing 150 persons per night and feeding 600 per day. These surging numbers tell the bad news of terribly great need, of countries with failed governments and people who are suffering from violence and incredible poverty in many countries of Latin America and beyond. But these numbers in one Methodist church in Mexico also are a tremendous example of the good news of Jesus Christ.

How is that church doing such a mighty work? Fortunately, they have friends and supporters in their Methodist district and conference. Our United Methodist Committee on Relief has sent significant support. And others inside and outside Mexico are assisting too. Of course, there has been some

pushback from those who want to slow or stop immigration from happening. But the Methodist District Superintendent there has said such pressures won't stop the church's mission. "As evangelicals," he said, "we are bound by the Gospel. So, if I can care for the migrant, I will do so. If I can provide them shelter and weep with them, I will do so. If that means being rounded up with them in government sweeps, then so be it."¹

We can go fishing for people with confidence because we have good news that is relevant and vital to people's lives today. And, as Jesus' followers, we have the opportunity and responsibility to invite others to join us in this good and meaningful work. We are called by Jesus to fish for people.

CONCLUSION

A favorite hymn for many of us is "Pass It On." Baby boomers like me might remember singing this song at church camps and retreats. With the campfire popping, sparks jumping, and the s'mores ingredients waiting, we sang,

It only takes a spark to get a fire going,
and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing.
That's how it is with God's love
once you've experienced it;
You spread his love to everyone;
you want to pass it on.²

We have experienced the spark and warmth of God's good news in our lives. Now it's time to pass it on. We're called to fish for people.

¹https://www.umnews.org/en/news/as-migrant-numbers-surge-mexican-methodists-offer-hospitality?mkt_tok=MDc4LUpYUS02NDMAAAGRCyHmyk3zWFsUYoJQ7hya8yt5ozRv5EYY9IF3sKuBnojQtTJYkQNGoItyvNWjiiRH3lax4Xc65PixT3ojZR19ci7jl40q4LNI1SXPgG6sKM4JPA

²Kurt Keiser, 1969, c. 1969 Communique Music, Inc.