

Sermon: Leave Your Nets?

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Scriptures: Isaiah 9:1-4; Matt. 4:12-23

I recently heard a story told by Mark Greene, director of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, about a man called Peter. Peter was a recent retiree who had left behind the old trappings of his former life, including the town he had lived in for 25 years. He chose to retire to a new town where he didn't know a single soul. Peter could preach, teach, and counsel, but, as a retiree in a completely new place, he had no obvious in. He desired to make community connections and serve God by changing lives, but without a place to start, he felt a little stuck. So, like many of us who are stuck, Peter prayed to God for guidance and God led Peter to scripture, Jeremiah 29:7, to be specific, which says, "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." Well, Peter thought, that's not exactly clear, is it? So Peter prayed some more. "How can I help seek the peace and prosperity of my new town, Lord?"

Peter was a lot like the people Isaiah spoke about, those who sat in darkness waiting to see that great light that would guide the way toward the dawning of something new. In many ways, Peter was where many churches are today: seeking new ways to reach the community around them and remain relevant in a world that is changing rapidly. This is a hard place to be. When we're in this spot, we feel stuck and uncertain. What do we do, Lord? How should we proceed? If I could say anything encouraging about finding ourselves in this particular predicament, it would be to remind us that we are not the first people to face such urgent and difficult questions: the church has faced such inflection points throughout its history. We may be facing times that aren't like exactly those that came before ours, but broader situation we are in—a small, traditional church in an ever-widening progressive world—is nothing new.

Jesus knows something about these inflection points, too. As he traveled through the ancient Roman Empire at this early point in his ministry, the gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus was burdened by the death of John the Baptist. The text tells us he

withdrew—when people tell me God doesn't feel things the way we do, I think about scriptures like this one. Jesus felt things as deeply if not more deeply than we do. Many of us have a tendency to withdraw to feel our feelings, don't we? To process the challenges or pain we are going through. There is a reason we say the 23rd Psalm so often during times of grief or mourning: the idea of walking through the valley of the shadow of death is perhaps never more resonant than it is in that time. As he made his way from Nazareth to Capernaum, Jesus's heart may well have felt as though had been sitting in the darkness. The light on the horizon for him, and the light in that darkness he would go on to share with others, was the message of the Kingdom of Heaven, which, at his arrival in that region, had never been more near.

We are brought by Matthew's gospel to the shores of the Sea of Galilee as Jesus comes across two brothers whose names are familiar to us from last week's text from the gospel of St. John: Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, his brother. We are not told much about their interaction with Jesus, only that these fishermen were casting a net into the sea. Apropos of nothing, Jesus says to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." "Immediately," the text reads, "they left their nets and followed him."

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Now, you may remember that Jesus also met Simon Peter and Andrew in John's text, in which they followed him after hearing John's great exclamations. It has been said that John's calling of Andrew and Simon Peter conflicts with the story we are given in Matthew's gospel. Maybe that's true. But I don't see the contradiction that many others do. I think it's entirely possible that the text from John merely precedes this one in Matthew. What if John was showing us the introduction of Andrew and Peter to Jesus, and then Matthew is giving us the story of their calling to discipleship? I mean, it makes a bit more sense to me that they'd leave everything behind to follow Jesus if he were not brand new to their lives. They'd heard a good word from him sometime recently, had a bit of time to get to know him or at least to reflect on his message, so that when he does come to the shores of the sea and asks them to follow him, they can "immediately" leave their nets to follow him.

At some point after this, Jesus, Andrew, and Peter pass by James and John, sons of Zebedee, fishermen, too. Jesus calls to them as they are mending their nets and they also leave behind their nets and boat and *father* to follow Jesus. It is then that Jesus, with his first disciples, sets out healing and teaching throughout Galilee.

As I prepared this sermon for today, I was struck by the way Jesus calls these men, these men *in particular*, to be his followers. What was it about Andrew, Simon Peter, James, and John? Why fishermen? Did they offer something that others, perhaps, did not? Jesus, knowing that they are fishermen, pulls them into the ministry by telling them he can make them fishers of people. What does that mean? Fishers of people. How do you fish for people? How do you catch them? What lures? Cookies and cakes? For some it might be a good cup of coffee. My boys would like a Nintendo game, no doubt. For me, it might be a good vegan donut. How can we fish for people? I think, in part, this is Jesus saying, you're going to use your gifts and skills as fishermen to serve. Jesus sees a use for their gifts and talents and brings them along to explore how they can use those talents as his disciples. And they're curious enough to follow him to find out how.

But before they follow him, they leave behind their nets and their boats. Whatever gifts and talents they will have to give, it will not require things external to themselves like nets and boats. Jesus essentially sees something that is inherent in each of these disciples, something God-given. He doesn't need their physical resources. *They are the resource*. He basically says to these men, leave your baggage, bring your gifts.

Like the disciples, Peter from England is going to find a way to use what he has in the service of God's kingdom. Peter likes to go for walks and notices on those walks that there is litter scattered about the neighborhood. When he prays to God for guidance as to how he might serve in his new home, God tells him to *go pick up the litter!* This reminds Peter of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples—a selfless act of service to his fellow members of humankind. So Peter goes to the town council and he asks them to borrow a litter picking claw—which they gladly give him on permanent loan. And so Peter sets about picking up litter praising and thanking God for all the beauty of the world he is blessed to walk around in.

On his travels to and from the local nature reserve, Peter picks up litter and smiles and says hello to people. Eventually, people smile and say hello back. Once they've been introduced, they ask him why on earth is he walking through town picking up litter! Peter says it's because God loves the world and he wishes to love and care for it, too. All of these little conversations have Peter making connections. And when those connections remind him that this litter-picking is a thankless job and, at the same time, a sure ticket to heaven, Peter tells them that, while he does indeed hope for heaven, he's doing what he's going in service to God whom he loves and who loves him. Soon, people begin showing up at Peter's church for events, seeking a connection with the type of place a man like this would be associated with—all because Peter stopped and talked to them on his walk, picking up litter in service to God and his community. Eventually, people all over town are thanking Peter for this selfless act, waving and honking from their cars in gratitude for the person and service of Peter the Litter Picker.

Think about your life: what you do for work or what hobbies you enjoy? What kind of gifts and talents do you have that could be used in service to God and God's people? I wonder, who are Trinity's Peter the Litter Pickers? _____ *Here Pastor Jessica went out to the pews to point out a few folks asking them how they might use their gifts in service to the community _____.*

In this precarious time in church history, we know we need to be willing to step out in service of God's kingdom willing to do new things in new ways. It's a hard truth, but I think we all know something needs to change. We do have to adjust some of our ways of doing church to *serve the world as it is, not the world as it was*. But sometimes I think we make it harder than it needs to be. We think to do this, we need to reinvent the wheel, but when we do that, we are neglecting to notice the litter picking possibilities among us! Because the truth is, we all have something to offer, some interest, hobby, or work we are already good at or know so much about.

We will hold our annual congregational meeting next week and discuss the question: where are we on the continuum of our church's history and where do we want to be? To answer that question, we must be willing to bring our gifts and talents in ways we maybe

haven't yet considered. So this week, think about what you already know how to do or love to do and how you might use that God-given ability in service of God's created world. Jesus said that people will know we are his disciples by what our what? LOVE! Peter the Litter Picker didn't know the difference he would make through something as simple as litter picking, but, trusting God's guidance and provision, he moved forward boldly into that unknown mission, modeling God's love and grace for all the world. As Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 19:26: "with God all things are possible." All things are possible with God. How fortunate we are to be able to participate in all those things! Imagine the possibilities! Amen.