

“Come and Follow”

I bet there are some of you who enjoy fishing. You might find it a good way to connect with nature. You might enjoy the challenge of luring a wily fish onto your hook through the fashioning of a tricky lure or the selection of just the right bait. Perhaps you are quick handed and can grab a fish or scoop it up with a net. I confess to not being any of those things. While I enjoy being out in nature and I like a well-prepared fish dinner, I am not an adept fisherman.

The last time I went fishing was more than ten years ago on Nantucket Island. I was visiting a friend whose family owns a house on Nantucket. One day we went onto Great Point near the Great Nantucket Light to fish. Great Point is an amazing but narrow strip of sand that curls around Nantucket Sound forming its eastern border. It is a prime fishing spot. My friend coached me on casting and reeling in the fish. For someone whose coordination is stuck around age thirteen, the whole concept of spinning the reel while giving leeway on the rod was tricky. I often ended up being at odds with myself as I struggled to bring in a catch. The larger fish loved that. I trapped a snack for them to snatch off the end of the line. All was not in vain as I did eventually reel in a blue fish. I had my photo taken with it, unhooked it and tossed it back into the water where I think it got gobbled up by a larger fish. If Jesus saw that performance, I doubt he would have called me to fish for people as he did the brothers Simon and Andrew. Jesus would be too smart for that.

However, when Jesus is calling the brothers by the seashore, he uses the fishing metaphor because it makes sense to them. They understood fishing and the effort it took. They understood the patience it required. They also knew that commercial fishing is not a one-person operation. It required a group to haul nets, steer the boat, repair nets, sort fish, and get them to market for sale. Fishing is not a one-man show, and neither is evangelizing the world.

For the perceptive listener who was with us last week, you might be wondering about this version of the calling of the disciples. Last Sunday we heard from the Gospel of John a call story that has no similarity with this one except for the people involved. The most striking differences are that John the Baptizer is a key figure in the Johannine version. He points to Jesus as the Lamb of God, but in Matthew the only mention of him is that he is in prison. Last week we seemed to be in a village or even urban setting, while Matthew has us at the seashore. I remind you that these differences should not worry us. We have different authors telling the story from different points of view. We know from contemporary news stories that two eyewitnesses can have very different views of what happens; so did the Gospel writers.

As I said last week, when I see a difference between the Gospels, I wonder what the writer is trying to tell me. Matthew wants us to focus on the rural surroundings. They are in Galilee not in Judea near Jerusalem. He even calls in a prophecy from Isaiah to show that Jesus was supposed to focus his ministry on the town of Capernaum in the region of Galilee. Capernaum was a rather large seaside town at the top of the Sea of Galilee. It offers easy access to smaller

seaside towns on the Jewish and Gentile sides of the sea and into the countryside. It is a good base for evangelizing the area.¹

Even before he calls the brothers to follow, Matthew tells us that Jesus was preaching words of repentance and the Kingdom of Heaven. He says, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” It is a compelling message and one that he picked up from John the Baptizer. A full chapter earlier Matthew introduces John the Baptizer by writing, “In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, ‘Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.’”² A good sermon is always worth repeating. Matthew lets us know that Jesus and John the Baptizer are on the same page as far as the message to the people goes.

The astounding difference between the ministry of the two men is something that we almost gloss over. It is captured in that last sentence of today’s reading. Matthew points out that Jesus goes throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. John the baptizer’s ministry was in Judea the region near Jerusalem, Jesus is preaching and teaching in the boondocks. He is sharing his message and perhaps honing it with the rustic people of Galilee.

Jesus is also doing something that John does not do. Jesus is healing and curing diseases. In Jesus we have a man beyond John’s abilities. John baptized but he did not cure diseases. These miracles are signs that point to something different and special about Jesus. He may offer the same message as John, but he also offers something more. His power to heal gives people a glimpse of what the Kingdom of Heaven holds for them. He is opening the door for a peek into what the fulfillment of God’s redemptive power means for all who will open themselves up to the love of God and neighbor.

This invitation and glimpse into heaven is also there for us. If we decide to come and follow Jesus, we have chosen to take off the blinders that world that has put on us. These blinders keep us from seeing the glory and miracles of God’s creation. These blinders forced us to look only in one direction. When we remove them, we can see that there is more than a life of drudgery that leads to death. There is more than incurable disease that snatches away the joy and wonder of life. There is the Kingdom of Heaven that opens to us like an epiphany of the grandest and most overwhelming kind. An epiphany that cannot be put back in the box or hidden by blinders. Once we glimpse the Kingdom of Heaven we yearn for it. We work for it and share with all whom we meet telling them to “Come and follow” because they cannot imagine what joy is being revealed to those who choose to follow Jesus.

¹ If you visit ruins of Capernaum today, you will find there a large synagogue which is from a time long after Jesus. This is not the size of type of synagogue he would have taught in. Synagogues of his day were more likely to be the size of the nave of this church or maybe even smaller. Capernaum also has the house of Peter’s mother-in-law whom Jesus will heal in chapter 8 of Matthew’s Gospel.

² Matthew 3:1-2 NRSV