

Sunday, January 25, 2026
Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)
Matthew 4.12-23
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Leaving Nets”

Both last week and today we heard accounts of Jesus calling his first disciples. Last week was the version reported in John’s Gospel and this week is obviously Matthew’s version. And while both involve two of the same future disciples—Andrew and Peter—the process actually differs significantly. As you may recall from last week, Andrew was originally a disciple of John the Baptist. When John, referring to Jesus, says “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” (Jn 1.35), Andrew and another unnamed person immediately go after Jesus. They spend some time together, and at least Andrew switches camps and becomes a disciple of Jesus. He then goes and finds his brother Peter and recruits him to the cause.

What we hear today, while also involving Andrew and Peter, is very different. While John tells of Andrew approaching Jesus, here in Matthew it is Jesus who approaches Andrew and Peter. And the impression given is that, until now, Jesus did not know the brothers and vice versa—one stranger approaching two other strangers. While John tells of Andrew spending time with Jesus and getting to know him before deciding to become a disciple, Matthew has Jesus, upon meeting the brothers, immediately issuing the invitation, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” At which point the brothers accept on the spot: “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

When you boil it down to these basic points, these two stories placed side-by-side indicate two different approaches to being called to follow Jesus. One, as pointed to in John’s Gospel, is the individual’s search for something more, something deeper; and upon finding that Jesus offers what is desired, that he can fulfill that desire, the individual makes the conscious choice to follow Jesus. The other, as pointed to in Matthew’s Gospel, is an invitation directly from Jesus to follow him, often coming out of the blue. So, which is it? Our own initiative, or Jesus’ invitation? The answer would be “yes.” As anyone who has been through a formal discernment process with respect to going into ministry, and frankly, as anyone who has made the choice to follow Jesus in their own lives knows, it is not an either/or but rather a both/and. If anything, it is a cyclical process entailing both personal and divine initiative. We feel a yearning, a tug, for something more, something deeper. At the same time, Jesus is always there, ready to issue an invitation. Which leads to our own discernment as to whether to accept the invitation, and if so, what does that look like? Which leads to Jesus welcoming us in, guiding us on the path we have mutually discerned. This certainly happens in the discernment of whether one feels called to ordained ministry. This happens in discernment whether one feels called to monastic life. (Which, by the way, today, the Third Sunday after the Epiphany has been designated by The Episcopal Church as Religious Life Sunday, which seeks to highlight the monastic communities within our Anglican tradition and what they have to offer the church). But such discernment, be it formal or informal, is how we each seek to live our lives of faith as Christians, be we lay or ordained.

While both the personal desire and Jesus' invitation are part of the process, today we focus on Jesus' invitation as presented in Matthew's Gospel. Largely because that is the Gospel for today. But also because the other piece, the personal desire and motivation, is so unique to the individual that it is harder to adequately address in a sermon. And besides, as we shall see, the two are so intimately connected that the individual desire and motivation does come into play even in Matthew's account of the calling of the first disciples.

So, what does this very short account have to tell us about being called to follow Jesus? After all, it is very sparse on details. The whole scene contained in three verses. One setting the scene: Jesus walking along the Sea of Galilee and seeing Andrew and Peter fishing. A second reporting Jesus issuing the invitation: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And the third reporting the response: "Immediately they left their nets and followed him." While these three verses are short on details, they are rich in underlying meaning.

First off, why Andrew and Peter? We cannot be sure, but it is certainly possible that Jesus, being both human and divine, may have had some insight into their hearts and minds, into the content of their character, to borrow a phrase from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his "I Have a Dream" speech. That Jesus somehow knew of their inner qualities, their values, their hopes and dreams, and saw something that he needed and could work with in the building of God's kingdom. It could have been that their very life circumstances made them ripe for the picking, so to speak. After all, they were fishermen. At that time and in that culture, fishermen were considered the lowest of the low in terms of professions. Despised by most people, despite providing a valuable service to society: providing food. On top of that, the Roman authorities tended to exploit this low status. The Empire contracted the services of fishermen, but often placed onerous quotas on the amount of fish to be provided, with penalties levied when not met. Just one outward side of the oppression of the Empire on the lives of the people. What better choice for disciples in his ministry to the marginalized: those who themselves are, in some ways, on the margins. Those who themselves are oppressed by the Empire.

Which leads to Jesus' invitation. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." This is not just a clever pun to get Andrew and Peter to give up their jobs as fishermen. It was not just a nice image of what they would be doing as disciples. Fishing for people was an ancient image dating back to at least the time of the Babylonian Exile six centuries before. The prophet Jeremiah uses fishing for people as an image of God's judgment: that the unrighteous and unjust were to be caught, like fish, by divine agents. And only then would the people be liberated from exile. In the minds of first century Jews, recalling this significant period in their history, the image of fishing for people would carry a message of the hope and promise of liberation and a new life. Andrew and Peter, in being invited to fish for people, would have heard an invitation to work with Jesus to bring about liberation for oppressed people—be it those oppressed, like they were, by status, by the Roman Empire, or those oppressed in other ways. Which was likely what Jesus really had in mind: the ultimate forms of oppression, that of sin and death.

This prospect to give up an oppressive profession of being fishermen in service of the Empire and working for liberation from empire in a variety of forms, would undoubtedly have been appealing to Andrew and Peter. To the point that, "Immediately they left their nets and

followed him.” They left their nets. Nets that trapped fish serving to trap them in a profession and financial obligations to the Empire. The nets themselves being a symbol of oppression, of what had been trapping them in their current lives. Leaving the nets being a symbol, being a rebellious act, of defiance against Empire in favor of a new empire, God’s kingdom. Leaving the nets being a defiant act of liberation from an oppressive and oppressed way of life in favor of a new life and a new profession that would work to bring liberation for all.

One thing that is striking in Jesus’ invitation is not in what he says, but in what he does not say. He does not tell Andrew or Peter what they have to believe. He does not give them a list of criteria or conditions that they have to meet. He simply says, “Follow me.” As one commentator notes:

The sheer minimalism of the call is striking. It may signal that while beliefs and behavior do play a role in discipleship, they’re not really the heart of the matter; rather, walking alongside Jesus is the heart of the matter: listening, reflecting, learning, and listening again. For the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the most remarkable thing about Jesus’ call is that it’s “void of all content.” There’s no program here, no platform, no set of opinions or list of rules. Only a call to companionship, to closeness, to living together as we walk toward heaven’s reign.¹

Leaving open the shape of Jesus’ invitation, of God’s call, to take whatever form is right for the one invited, for the one responding.

One aspect of the invitation, of the call to follow Jesus that is not directly covered in today’s Gospel reading, but is heavily implied, is that there is no experience required to follow him. Andrew and Peter certainly had no experience. We do not have to be perfect before we seek him or before we accept his invitation to follow him. Andrew and Peter certainly were not perfect. All it takes is a desire for a new way of being; a new way of living; a willingness to say “yes” to the invitation, just as Andrew and Peter did. And it takes a willingness to be changed, just as Andrew and Peter would be forever changed by that one decision to leave their nets to follow Jesus. For that is all part of the process. That is what the invitation to follow him is all about. Being invited into the fullness of who God created and calls us to be. Being changed into the fullness of who God created and calls us to be. Being changed into who Jesus invites us to be as those who follow him. To be willing to leave our metaphorical nets, to leave behind whatever it is in our own lives that holds us, encumbers us, binds us, to ways that do not serve us or that we no longer want to be associated with. To embrace the hope and the promise of liberation and new life that is at the heart of those two simple words: “Follow me.”

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/1/18/the-reign-of-heaven-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-3>