

January 22, 2017



## **“On learning the patient art of fishing”**

Sermon by Rev. Robert English

*Matthew 4:12-23*

*Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

*As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.*

*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*

Growing up in Texas meant that I went through a few strange phases as I grew into a young man. One of those phases was my desire to be a fisherman. I was about 10 or 11 years old when I became obsessed with this romanticized view of being a fisherman. I would wake up early on Saturday morning and instead of tuning into Saturday morning cartoons I would tune into Saturday morning fishing shows. You may or may not know that these existed, but ESPN and FOX sports would produce half hour TV shows dedicated to fishing. You’d watch the fisherman cast his line out into the water, he’d talk a little bit about why he chose that particular spot, he’d talk about the high tech gear he was using to tell the depth of the lake, the type of lure or bait he was using and bam! Within a matter of minutes he’d reel in a trophy size largemouth bass. I loved the idea of fishing that these shows presented. The beauty and serenity of the outdoors with regular jolts of excitement as you catch fish after fish after fish after fish. It all seemed like something that I’d be really, really good at. But, as it is with life, the reality didn’t really live up to the fantasy. I tried to be a fisherman, I really, really did. I went regularly to the canals of the Rio Grande or the lakes of the Sacramento Mountains of New Mexico. My dad took me, my uncle took me, my Boy Scout troop took me, I really tried to love it.

But there are a few things I learned about fishing from actually doing it. 1. It’s hard. 2. It takes an unbelievable amount of patience. 3. In order to be into it for the long haul you have to embrace the process and let go of the results. Because fishing isn’t about how many fish you catch, it’s the joy you find in fishing.

Today we hear the story of the early part of Jesus’ public ministry. Jesus bursts onto the scene, moving from his hometown to a village called Capernaum and he begins to invite people to change their hearts and lives, to repent, to follow him and live into a new way of human being, and one of his very first actions is to call his first disciple.

When I read this story, I have a tendency to focus on the immediacy of the whole thing. There is a certain pacing in the story telling that communicates an energy as Jesus pivots from his proclaiming the good news to walking alongside the lake of Galilee and calling the first disciples.

Jesus calls to Peter and Andrew, “Come follow me, I’ll show you how to fish for people.” And the text says “right away they left their nets and followed him.” Later Jesus sees James and John with their dad in a boat, Jesus calls to them to follow and the text says immediately they left their father’s boat and followed him.

Many of us tend to pick up on this element and focus our attention on the urgency of it all. And, more often than not, some of us feel a certain amount of discipleship envy or discipleship inadequacy as we ask questions of ourselves like, could I really do this if Jesus called me? Have I heard the call of Jesus in my life or do I really prefer my own vision for the way things ought to be? Or could I leave behind my father, mother, children, family, friends, spouse if I heard the voice of Christ?

All of this might lead us to think that God doesn’t really call ordinary people like you and me to this kind of life; God only calls people who are willing to give it all up immediately, right away, to walk away from it all in order to give themselves fully for Jesus.

Well, there is some truth to that, but, if you read on in the story and try to have a larger sense of what the disciples are like then you’ll know that they aren’t really saints, they aren’t people you should put up on a pedestal, or folks whose lives were so much more holy than ours that it’s really unattainable for you and me.

Nope, they are ordinary, everyday kind of people, beautifully fragile people, with flaws and gaps and sins and shortcomings. They doubted, they believed, they performed miracles and were full of fear, they questioned, they challenged, they shared, they hoarded, they followed and they abandoned, and ultimately they persisted in faith, because they had encountered unconditional, life-giving love.

I think there’s a reason that Jesus called fisherman into his way of living, because I think that Jesus is smart, savvy, and inspired, because fishing is hard, it takes patience and in order to be into it for the long haul you have to embrace the process and let go of the results.

So let’s take some time to unpack what exactly the disciples are called to when they are called to “fish for people.”

Perhaps you've heard that phrase "fish for people" and the first thought that comes to mind is evangelism, or "bringing people to church." I can remember being a boy and hearing this phrase and literally conjuring up a picture of the disciples casting a net into a crowd and drawing in a whole bunch of people into a church. It's kind of a weird image when you think about it and it does beg the question is this really what God wants? For us to cast a net out into a crowd and corral a bunch of people into church to occupy some pews?

Really, what Jesus called these men to do is to take what they already knew, take their gifts, their talents, their energy, to take who they were and to shift it from serving themselves to serving others. Jesus meets these guys where they are at, speaks to them in a language they can understand and comprehend and digest, and invites them into a life of being transformed by God's love by "fishing for people" by seeking out those in the world in need of love, of community, of hope, and transformation. Which, by the way, is everyone.

Jesus says take who you are and what you do and invite God into it, to be part of it. Allow the Holy Spirit to make and mold your activities in this world in such a way that it will bring life, energy and joy to others. Fish for people, live life for others, choose relationship over isolation. Choose love over separation. Choose the other over the self.

No matter who you are and what you do, invite God to be part of it, welcome God into it, ask God to bless it, ask for God's help to use you and your skills to build a better world. It doesn't matter if you work in finance or software development, if you're a teacher or librarian, if you work at Vons or your job is grandma. God can use your loving service to transform the life of another. Be kind, be humble, help others, receive them just the way they are.

How many of us have had a "Nothing is going right, the world is out to get me" kind of day? When we drag ourselves into our local coffee shop to order a cup of much needed coffee and the barista says, "Wow you look like you've had a day, I hope it gets better." And, low and behold, in that moment it does.

Ok, so here's the craziest thing of all: when someone else is transformed by God through a loving relationship with you, you are transformed alongside them. That's the gift. That's the grace. It's mutual, it's symbiotic. Love begets love.

As you give of yourself in love for another person you start to see the world from their perspective. You start to understand more about their hopes and desires and you learn a little bit about their suffering.

You start to picture a different kind of world that's ruled by love and mercy and peace.

You start to see how self-centered you can be at times and you start to move away from this tendency because you want to make a bigger difference and to impact more lives.

It's infectious and energizing. It gives you purpose and meaning and it brings you back around to that original call. It brings you back around to the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ, a love without condition.

So, what Jesus essentially is teaching us here is that following him isn't something we just do on Sundays. Our Sunday spiritual practice is crucial for our maturation as disciples, but it can't end once we hear the benediction. We come here to find our center and leave here to practice loving others. We come here to be filled up in order to be poured out in love for others.

But the truth is that this practice of loving and serving others is like fishing, it's hard, it takes an unbelievable amount of patience, and in order to be into it for the long haul you have to embrace the process and let go of the results.

It's hard because people don't think the way you think. They don't vote the way you vote. It's hard because people in this world are fans of the Green Bay Packers. It's hard because the call to love as Jesus loves requires us to resist the urge we all feel to clearly define who's worthy of love and who isn't, or, until they change enough to fit our image of what a person is supposed to look or act like. It's hard because sometimes you're really nice and you go out of your way to help someone, and they don't offer you the kind of appreciation you think you deserve.

It's hard. Loving someone is hard and because loving people is hard it requires patience. It means we have to commit over time, we have to try and fail, and we have to hold space for one another and actually try to listen to others; not just quietly wait for our turn to speak. We have to engage and interact, we have to choose relationship, and we have to choose others over self, instead of withdrawing into the echo chambers of Facebook.

And most of all we need to be in prayer. We need to lift one another up in prayer, to pray for our relationships, for healing, forgiveness and reconciliation.

And if we are really going to love others we need to embrace the process and let go of the results. Because following Jesus means that we have to learn to surrender and to trust in something bigger than us. It means that we need to resist that urge to control and manipulate everything and everyone in our life until we finally reach that certain unattainable self-directed goal. We have to love without expecting anything in return because we believe in grace which is a love that is unmerited.

It means that we need to be open to possibilities that we can't even imagine. It means that we need to be humble and have faith, that God knows what God is doing, and that God is really at work within and through human hearts to renew, restore and heal our world.

Jesus called ordinary people like you and me to change their heart and their lives because the kingdom of God is drawing near. He invited people to do what they do, to be who they are becoming in service of God's kingdom which is loving others in this world. He said follow me, and I will show you the way. May God grant us enough courage to say yes, today, tomorrow and beyond. Thanks be to God.