**I Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23**

**Third Sunday after Epiphany**

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Whenever I hear a fish story, I think of my father. There were few things he enjoyed more than fishing and there was nothing more my siblings and I enjoyed than ribbing him about it. You see, my Dad wasn’t particular about the when, where and how’s of fishing. He didn’t always wait until the conditions were right. He didn’t always go expecting to bring anything home. He just went fishing. It was what any boy growing up in coastal Carolina did. He fished.

Every time our family returned to the coast of South Carolina for a visit, Dad would take his boat and his fishing gear out to the inter coastal waterway and spend day after day throwing out a fishing line or a shrimp net. It didn’t matter so much if he actually caught anything or if he did, how big it was, because my Dad was eternally optimistic and imaginative. The more he recounted his adventures on the water, the more successful the fishing got and the bigger the fish got. He was single-minded when it came to fishing and nothing deterred him from it.

The fishermen in Matthew’s story, on the other hand, drop everything when Jesus calls out to them. Follow me, he says, and they do, without hesitation. Follow me, and I’ll make you fishers of people.

When I imagine what those fishermen were like, I think of my father: quiet, introverted types that are more content being alone for large stretches of time than with large groups of people; content to scan the water for the slightest movement, to position and re-position the boat, and cast a line over and over. These are not people looking for attention or drama. They just want to catch fish.

So, how is it that they are going to catch people? Why didn’t Jesus pick people with status in the community, people who were natural leaders with a demonstrated record of speaking persuasively and motivating people to change? What if people are turned off by their message? What if they’re not comfortable talking about religion with others? And what do they know about the kingdom of heaven anyway?

Surely these questions must have crossed their minds as they prepared to leave behind everything they knew to follow this man. Nothing in the story suggests that these fishermen had a clue about what they were getting into or whether they were equipped to do what Jesus asked.

So I think it’s fair to say that we don’t have to be experts either. We don’t have to have all the answers. Heck, we don’t even have to know all the questions. Our job is to follow Jesus, not lead him. And he has left us with a whole lifetime of instruction.

Much around us has changed since the earliest days of the church, but Jesus’ mission remains the same. Our responsibility is to figure out what it means for us, in our day and time, to follow him. Where is he leading *us*?

This story gives us two clues. First, Jesus is announced as the light that has come to the people who sit in darkness. Second, Jesus goes to the people, to the places they gather. Jesus took the light to the dark places in the world. He went to the places and to the people that needed to hear the good news. “Jesus doesn’t wait for people to apply to him in hopes of learning from him. Instead, he seeks them out” (Miller, p. 289, *Feasting*).

Jesus’ call to us has not changed over these many years, but much around us has. As we continually try to discern what this means for us in this day and time, we find ourselves in good company. More and more, the church is seeking to discover the call of Jesus anew. But it is not without difficulty.

What are those dark places in our community that need to see the light? And where are they?

The ongoing challenge of the church in the 21st century is recognizing that Jesus’ goal is not to lead us into the church building to stay, but to get us out into the world. One writer puts it this way: “Jesus’ call “has very little to do with the comfort of a church that serves the needs of the disciples and everything to do with challenging the disciples to go and meet the needs of people in strange and foreign communities (which are increasingly right at our doorstep).”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The challenge for us is rediscovering what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and how that differs from the traditional understanding of what it means to be a member of the church. This story gets at the very heart of that conversation.

It challenges us, as it did those two fishermen, to leave the comfort of familiar surroundings and familiar people and to go to unknown places and people, to follow Jesus into the places of darkness where he is already shining the light. And you don’t have to go far from the front door of this church to find him.

There are many hungry and hurting people in our own community. Just on the other side of the downtown mall, men and women and children live in transitional housing at the downtown YMCA and in the shelter of the Unions Rescue Mission. If they find a more permanent place to live, many will be forced to live in substandard housing because they have no other choice.

Even for those in the community who do have a roof over their heads, hunger remains a huge problem. Participants in the Summer Lunch Box program know this first hand, having prepared and delivered 1,000’s of lunches to children who would not otherwise have them during the summer.

Meanwhile the shadow of opioid addiction hangs over us daily. In just one year, the rate of overdose in Allegany County has doubled.

What does it mean for us to go where the people are? What does it mean to share the good news of the gospel with them?

When we started focusing on this question as a congregation three years ago, it was hard to know where to start. But since then, we have come a long way – starting with the New Beginnings process that led us through a self-evaluation of ourselves and our community, our gifts and our needs.

In 2015 the session recommended that we engage more directly with the people of our community, partnering with others to alleviate poverty and hunger. And so we have, sometime in fits and starts, but always moving in that direction.

Today, we are doing that more and more: going to the HRDC once a month to set up, serve and clean up a meal to our neighbors in South Cumberland; partnering with Bridges to Opportunity to provide allies for folks seeking to overcome poverty; opening our doors to a variety of groups who want to work together to fight the opioid crisis; reaching out to the children of our city to provide a safe place to gather for Halloween, just to name a few.

I’m not lifting up these efforts so we can congratulate ourselves. I’m lifting them up to demonstrate the ways in which we have sought to follow Jesus, and to help cast his light into places of darkness – the darkness of poverty, the darkness of addiction, the darkness of anger and division; loneliness and despair.

In the process, we’ve discovered that Jesus isn’t calling us to be charismatic. Jesus isn’t calling us to preach from street corners. Jesus isn’t calling us to be extroverts. In fact, Jesus says nothing at all about speaking. And best of all, he doesn’t require us to agree with each other or look like each other or vote like each other.

He simply says, “follow me” and I will show you how. He meets us where we are and shows us how to offer whatever we can, even if the only thing we’ve ever done in our lives is catch fish.

There’s nothing in this story to suggest that the fisherman had a clue about what they were getting into or whether they were equipped to do what Jesus asked. We don’t have to be experts either. We don’t have to have all the answers. Heck, we don’t even have to know all the questions.

Follow me, says Jesus. I will lead you.

1. This quote comes from a Leader’s Guide developed by Church Extension of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) for “New Beginnings” a discernment process for churches seeking God’s will for their future.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)