

Sunday, January 24, 2021

Sermon: Fishers for Humanity: Rethinking Jesus' Call of the First Disciples

Guest Speaker: Joel Ekdahl

Clackamas United Church of Christ

We want to introduce you to our guest speaker, Joel Ekdahl. Joel has been coming to Clackamas UCC a little bit before we started worshiping online and has quickly become a valued person here, as everyone is. Joel teaches English at Canby High School and will now bring the Good Word through some teaching and preaching.

I want to start off by thanking Pastor Adam for the opportunity to preach this morning. It's been a dream of mine to take on a bigger role in a church community and I am so grateful to have this opportunity. I also want to thank my fellow theologians at bible study every Tuesday. Most of what you're going to hear here comes from those direct conversations I had with them this week and last. And lastly, I want to thank Rae who also comes to bible study. She helped me edit my sermon last night and made it a lot better, so thank you Rae.

Okay, let's jump in. The title of my sermon is Fishers for Humanity: Rethinking Jesus's Call of the First Disciples. As we heard from Roman earlier, it's from Mark 1:14-20.

I've heard ministers preach on today's passage a few times in my life and every time the message is pretty similar, "We are those fishermen, and God calls all of us to evangelize and to bring sinners to God." That's the message we get. Okay, however this interpretation has always left me feeling incredulous and a bit anxious. First and foremost, it seems unlikely that these fishermen Simon, Andrew, James and John would immediately drop everything to follow a man they didn't know. Following Jesus would have required them to leave their jobs as fishermen which, in turn, would have put their families in great economic peril. Fishermen were not wealthy people. They were probably barely making enough money to support their families, thus their decision to follow Jesus would have incurred a cost. And maybe that's why it's hard for me to believe that they would drop everything immediately.

Furthermore, how could this "Call" be universal? Yes, missionary work is very important and something that I support and Jesus was, no doubt, recruiting these young fishermen to be a part of his movement. But there are many important jobs in this world. Who will house and feed the missionaries when they are away from home? And who will protect them from criminals and foreign invaders?

Not everyone can be a missionary, right? I should have questioned this interpretation a long time ago but instead I doubled down on conventional wisdom and decided there was something wrong with me. I just didn't have enough faith and maybe I wasn't worthy of God's call after all. As you can imagine, this caused me a lot of anxiety and a lot of self-doubt, so when I was given this passage to preach on this week, I decided it was time for me to unlearn this old interpretation.

Taking cues from Pastor Adam, I set out this week to put this passage in its proper historical and linguistic context. I did research online, I spoke to my fellow theologians at bible study and I prayed for guidance, and do you know what I found? That old interpretation was completely wrong.

Looking back, I should have known this instinctually. First, Jesus says, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light” - Matthew 11:30. Any interpretation of the scriptures that adds stress or anxiety to your life is a bad one. God's call is not a burden – it is liberating. He calls us to repent of our old ways of thinking and to love ourselves and others. More completely, today I hope that my reading of the scriptures will allow you to see God's call in a whole new way.

Let's start with my first misconception. Jesus was not a stranger to the fishermen. He wasn't just a random guy who showed up to their work one day and said, “Hey, I’m the son of God. Come follow me.” That is a really bad analogy and it's one that you fall into if you take this passage too literally. Instead, Jesus and his disciples were part of a growing movement in first century Israel. The book of John tells us that Andrew, if not others, was a disciple of John the Baptist and that John told Andrew that Jesus was the Lamb of God, the one that he had foreseen.

Furthermore, Andrew spent time with Jesus before his calling and even brought his brother, Simon, to meet him – him being Jesus. Therefore, when Jesus approached them on the Sea of Galilee, they would have known him and believed that he was the Lamb of God. For John had preached the Kingdom of Heaven has come near – Matthew 3:2.

Moreover, it's important to note that Jesus called the disciples after John was arrested. That is the opening lines of our passage today – after John was arrested. On that fateful day when Jesus called the fisherman, he wasn't asking them to do anything sudden or out of the ordinary. He was rallying John's old follower and asking them to continue with what John had started.

Now to my second misconception. Jesus didn't call Andrew, Simon, James and John to evangelize. He was recruiting them as leaders in the struggle for social and economic justice. The term “fissures of men or for men,” would have had a very distinct meaning for Jews living in the first century, A.D. It was an allusion to particular passages from the Old Testament, Jeremiah 16:16, Amos 4:2 and Ezekiel 29:4, for example. Where hooking a fish was a euphemism for judgment upon the rich and the powerful.

Jesus took this mandate as his own and he called the fishermen to join him in the struggle to overturn the existing order of power and privilege in Israel. Therefore, these early disciples would not have heard the call in the same way that we do. They would have heard his call as an invitation to overthrow the same rich and powerful people who arrested their beloved leader, John the Baptist. But why would Jesus recruit fisherman to lead his movement? Wouldn't he want the most well-educated rabbis and teachers in Israel/ Well no, Jesus was a different kind of leader. He didn't promote the richest, the smartest, the most well-connected. Instead, he elevated those who had been marginalized, those who had been cast out, those who had been looked down upon, those who had been excluded for who they were. And the reason he picked them was because they were the most qualified to lead in this new Kingdom. Having experienced marginalization firsthand, they could emphasize with and best care for

the poor, the infirm, the lonely, and the scared. They had the unique mix of skills, knowledge, and empathy necessary to create a more fair and just world for everyone.

The fisherman he called may not have been abjectly poor or infirm themselves but they definitely knew a thing or two about being left out. As fishermen, they would have been seen as nobodies by the religious and economic establishment. They were the kids who didn't cut it in rabbinical school, the young men who dropped out of school to work for the family business, the hard-working men who yearned for a more just and loving world. Therefore, Jesus called his early disciples to use their skills to further the Kingdom of God on earth.

When Jesus told his disciples that he would make them fish for men, he was speaking their language, he was saying follow me and instead of fishing for profit, use your skills to feed the people of our new Kingdom. Join me and let's put people over profit. God's call is the same for you and I. He says to follow me and I will take who you are and what you do and I will put it to use in our Kingdom.

God calls each and every one of us to use our gifts and our abilities to further the work of social and economic justice. Let me give you a few examples – if you are an accountant you can use your knowledge to ensure the world is more fair, if you are an architect you can construct buildings that serve the needs of all people, if you are a doctor or a nurse or work in the medical field you can heal people in the new Kingdom, if you are a musician you can make a joyful noise unto the Lord, if you are a writer you can use words to capture people's hearts and to help them see the truth.

No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, there is a place for you in God's Kingdom. I promise he meets us where we are and he asks us to do one very simple thing – do all the good you can, for as long as you can, for as many people as you can.

So, I leave you today with two questions. First, now that you understand God's call, are you ready to answer the call? And two, if you are ready, how are you going to help build a more loving and just world for everyone? Thank you. Amen