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Let's Go Fishing

Mark 1:16-20

One of the few heart-warming stories to come out of Haiti in recent weeks is the story of "Mission of Hope," a ministry that operates about an hour outside Port-au-Prince. Mission of Hope's directors, Brad and Vanessa Johnson visited Haiti in 1998. They were entranced by Haiti's natural beauty and friendly people, but appalled by the poverty – by not only the lack of clean water and electricity, but by abandoned children, the absence of medical care, and that only fifteen percent of Haitian children graduate from High School. Everywhere they experienced despair and defeat.

So they prayerfully began a ministry called "Mission of Hope." Today, 12 years later, the ministry includes a vibrant, growing church, a K– 12 school with over 1300 students, a facility for orphans, and a hospital under construction. Literally they are providing hope where there was none!

What impels a Brad and Vanessa Johnson to devote their lives to the poorest of the poor? What motivates them to live far from family and friends? What sustains them amid the heartbreak of AIDS, high infant mortality rates, and grinding poverty? Most of us would struggle if we lived in Haiti. I loved our trip to Malawi last September, but it was good to get home, to luxuriate in a warm bath for 30 minutes, and then to enjoy a glass of wine and a steak. A ten-day sojourn to Africa is quite different from spending one's life amid squalor and despair.

Brad and Vanessa serve in Haiti because they feel a calling, a summons, a tug on their heartstrings, a burden implanted by God. During their first trip to Haiti, Brad and Vanessa thought of all of their abundant blessings. And moved by compassion, they realized that they wanted to share their blessings with the least of their brothers and sisters. So Brad and Vanessa have twin motivations – compassion and a calling. Life in Haiti can be wrenching, particularly now, but the Johnsons are there for the long haul.

But doesn't each of us have a calling? Think of why you chose your profession. Wasn't it because you had an interest, a passion, an excitement about that chosen field! You saw it as a place where you could have impact and make a difference, where you could not only support your family, but contribute to the community. Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* has sold 30,000,000 copies because God created us to have purpose, to make a difference. We want to know that our lives count, that we are part of a larger plan, that life is not *all sound and fury signifying nothing*.

The father of one of my high school friends died of a heart attack at the age of 46. I remember "Steve" being called out of class and the sadness of the funeral. But that event crystallized Steve's calling, because he became a cardiologist, and has spent his life trying to help and to heal patients like his father.

God intends that each of us find our calling, our purpose, the reason that He created us. The Psalmist is quite certain that we are not accidents that we did not come about by chance. He writes, *"For you, (O God), created my inmost being: you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made . . . My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place . . . your eyes saw my unformed body."* God designed us and shaped us, and gives us gifts and abilities so we can contribute to His larger purpose of redeeming our world.

In our passage this morning, Jesus walks on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. As He walks, He comes upon Peter and Andrew, poor fishermen, casting their nets into the Sea. "Come follow me," Jesus insists, "and I will make you fishers of men and women." Further down the beach, Jesus comes upon James and John, who operate Zebedee, Inc. Unlike Peter and Andrew, they have a fleet of boats, hired men, and servants. They're a large cut above Peter and Andrew. And Jesus also calls them, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men and women." And like Peter and Andrew, James and John drop their nets and follow Jesus.

But Jesus' call of these first disciples would have startled Mark's first readers. No self-respecting rabbi in the first century went out searching for students. First century students came to rabbis, begging to be allowed to study. Rabbis questioned prospective students in exacting detail, and allowed very few to stay. Rabbis didn't waste time with fools or the semi-literate. But here's Jesus strolling down the beach, picking up some riff-raff, a couple of blue-collar, common fishermen. Doesn't Jesus have any standards?

Of course, God delights in using unexpected candidates to do his work. Abraham and Sarah are up in years; Moses is out of the mainstream for 40 years; Rahab is a prostitute; David is an adulterer; Paul evidently is so abrasive or homely that no woman will have him. Jesus Himself is born in suspicious circumstances. So perhaps it's not surprising that Jesus picks a Peter whose chief gift seems to be sticking a sandal in his mouth. Jesus seems to believe in us, even when we don't believe in ourselves.

And nothing is said about the faith, abilities and potential of these first disciples. Jesus doesn't call them out of a synagogue service or when they're making a pilgrimage to the Temple. Jesus' chosen disciples aren't Pharisees or scribes, those with religious training. For some months, we've been searching for a Director of Family, Youth and Children's Education to strengthen that vitally important part of our church's ministry. We've posted the job description with Christian colleges and seminaries, with the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, VA, and on Children's and

Youth Ministry websites. We're not looking for someone working in a body shop or for a second shift employee from McDonalds.

So why is Jesus calling people like Peter? For, in fact, if you were doing a background check on Peter, here's what you might hear – "Peter is brash, semi-literate, poor, bull-headed and stubborn. His enthusiasm can outweigh his common sense; his language is often uncouth; he doesn't always listen; he has questionable people-skills, and he makes promises he can't keep." George Buttrick, a great Presbyterian preacher of the 1920s, says this about Jesus' choice of disciples:

*Phillip looks before he leaps; Peter leaps before he looks. Thomas was a dogged unbeliever until the last minute. Judas sought regeneration through revolution, rather than revolution through regeneration. James and John wanted to get rid of the people who differed with them, instead of getting rid of the differences, so they could get the people.*

But when choosing disciples, Jesus seems to look at our potential, not our deficiencies.

And why is Jesus calling followers from such diverse backgrounds. Peter and Andrew are poor, relegated to casting a net from shallow water. By contrast, James and John are upper middle-class, and we soon find out, quite full of themselves. When Jesus tells His disciples, "I am going up to Jerusalem and there I will be betrayed, arrested, tried, and crucified," James and John take him aside, "Sorry to hear that Lord, but when you come into your Kingdom, can one of us sit at your right hand and one of you at your left." No wonder the disciples at times seethed at one another. But maybe the Kingdom is all about learning to love one another, despite our differences.

And finally, do you know how old these first disciples are? They're probably 17 – 20 years old. In the time of Jesus' ministry, Jewish citizens over 21 had to pay a temple tax. And one day a tax collector approaches Jesus and His disciples for payment. But he collects the tax on only Jesus and Peter, meaning the other disciples must have been in their late teens. How sad if we don't look to our youth for their gifts and passions!

What is crystal clear is that Jesus summons all of us to serve. So what might His call be? First, Jesus will probably tell us, "Use your gifts." God's will for us is almost always related to our gifts and passions. Spiritual author Henri Nouwen used to say, "God's will is where your passion and the world's need intersect." He says, "If you work in a leper colony, and you hate it, then that probably isn't God's will for you. Conversely if your whole life is consumed with nothing more than making widgets, then that isn't God's will either." So where does your passion and the world's need intersect?

Second, Jesus will tell you, "Do good." After Peter becomes an apostle, he summarizes Jesus' ministry by saying, "You know what happened . . . after the baptism that John preached – how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and

how *he went around doing good.*" Put a bit differently, Jesus' call is for us to keep asking, "How can I help?"

When I was about nine, a deep snow blanketed Bethlehem, PA where I grew up. Wanting to earn some money I went over to the next block, knocked on a door and asked if I could shovel the walk. The elderly couple agreed and offered to pay me a fortune - \$2. So I began shoveling. I shoveled and shoveled and shoveled. But the snow had drifted and it was cold and the wind was blowing. Soon I was exhausted. I kept at it, but the longer I shoveled, the deeper the drifts seemed to get. I started sniffing, feeling very sorry for myself, when a friend of my older brother happened past. He was 17, and more than twice my size. He came up, put a hand on my shoulder and said words that still bless my heart, "Can I give you a hand?" We finished in twenty minutes, and he let me keep the whole \$2. What a gift his help turned out to be!

Jesus' call to us will probably be, "Use your gifts!" "Do good." And "connect deeply to others." It was sad to read last week about John Edwards admitting to being the father of child conceived during an affair with an aide. John's wife Elizabeth, who's been battling breast cancer, made a revealing comment during an interview back in September. She said, "John stopped confiding in anyone. He was traveling; we weren't together; we didn't talk in depth." In other words, Edwards didn't allow anyone to know his heart, and look at the result. We need each other; we need to be deeply connected. One of the reasons we emphasize the importance of small groups is that every one of us needs a 2:00 a.m. friend, someone in whom we can entrust with our hearts.

Jesus calls each of us to use our gifts, to do good, to connect deeply to others. And He calls us to one specific activity, "*to come, follow Me.*" The call to discipleship is the call to follow Jesus day by day. Every story in the gospels is a snapshot or portrait of how Jesus lived. We follow Him by studying and heeding the specifics of Jesus life.

How does Jesus live? He prays, seeking the guidance and empowering of His heavenly Father. He allows Himself to be interrupted, going far afield when an anxious father tells him, "My daughter is dying." Jesus invests in others, spending hours building up and teaching these disciples who often seem so dim-witted.

How does Jesus live? He confronts injustice, overturning the tables of the money-changers who make a mockery of the Temple. He touches a leper, loving the unlovely. He stills a storm, remaining calm when all hell is breaking loose.

How does Jesus live? He eats with sinners and tax collectors, welcoming the lost to God's Kingdom. He forgives those who hate Him, murmuring on the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Even when He faces death, He does not lose heart, for nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God.

Deep within each of us is the desire to make a difference, to have our lives count, to leave behind not regrets, but a legacy. God has shaped us and molded us. He has given us gifts and experiences, and has helped us through particular difficulties and trials. As surely as Jesus called Peter and Andrew, and James and John, He calls us. "Come," He says, "Follow me. Listen for my call; live as I show you; be alert to the nudges of my Spirit." Then trust that as you do so, you are playing a part in the most important drama of life, helping to heal and redeem a broken and hurting world. Thanks be to God!