

CALLING FISHERMEN

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, JANUARY 23, 2011
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
ARCADIA, FLORIDA
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MATTHEW 4:12-23

Ann Rice, in her novel *Christ the Lord: The Road to Cana*, recounts the calling of Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John a little differently. That is all right. Each of the four gospels tells the story a little differently. The point of the story is always more important than the details, or the way the story is told, anyway. And the point of this story is that Jesus called four fishermen, two sets of brothers, to be His first disciples, and as He called them, He made the little play on words that is obvious in both the original Greek and in the King James Version of the Bible. He called these fishermen to be fishers of men.

Oh, we get all tied up in language these days. I think the best translation would be to follow the example of William Alexander Percy (in the hymn *The Cast Their Nets in Galilee*) and call them fisher folk. Then they would be called to be fishers of folks.

That is what Peter and Andrew and James and John became: fishers of folks. They drew men and women and boys and girls to do exactly what they had been called to do: to follow Jesus.

George Buttrick, in his exposition of this text for *The Interpreter's Bible*, asks what kind of men these were, that came to follow Jesus. He says of them:

"They were not impoverished: they were busy fishermen, these four. They were average men. The Sanhedrin could ask with confidence, 'Have any of the rulers of the Pharisees believed on him?' (John 7:48.) These four came from 'Main Street.' They had petty ambitions even when they had been with Jesus for many months. They quarreled. They were not outstandingly brave: at the Crucifixion, they all forsook him and fled. It seems clear that Jesus could find many like them in (any) town. They were individual men, not twelve copies. They were representative. Peter was headstrong, Andrew was homespun and loyal, James and John were 'sons of thunder. (Mark 3:17). Each after his own kind was indeed to enrich the kingdom-witness. Jesus did not obliterate their distinctiveness: he gathered their several gifts into an orchestra of praise. They were friendly, honest, enthusiastic men. They were capable of leaving home and their accustomed life for a new cause. They kindled to a leader and a venture. Better still, they glowed to the purpose of God: they were reverent men. These

Jesus chose in deliberate prayer, and counted them of such worth that he gave them the best of his time and thought. He cast on them an ultimate trust. They were “the light of the world” (5:14) and ‘the salt of the earth’ (5:13). He challenged them to risk all for God’s kingdom in him. His words were... (a) manly and divine appeal. ... (S)ome despair about...the ordinary man. Jesus chose such to be his heralds and the builders of the new world. Now our best art and architecture honor them. But only because of Jesus.” (Volume 7, 276.)

On that first day of calling disciples to follow Him, Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John were the catch of the day.

My favorite seafood restaurant in all the world is the Fishery at Placida. It is a wonderful old Florida restaurant, as authentic and real as a place can be, looking out over the water, right in the spot where generations of commercial fishermen plying the waters of Charlotte Harbor have brought their fish to sell.

Most places like that offer a catch of the day.

At some places, it is whatever the fishermen are catching on any particular day, whatever has been most plentiful, whatever is in season, whatever can be brought for the lowest price.

Grouper, redfish, snapper, mackerel, mullet, any of these might show up as catch of the day. Might, but probably won’t.

To get the best, to get the quality, to get something identifiable, you may want to order off the menu, and pay a little more.

I don’t remember seeing “catch of the day” on the menu at the Fishery.

For other folks, the catch of the day is special. It is the best fish, the freshest, and maybe the most expensive item on the menu.

The attitude of a sea-food restaurant to the catch of the day is a determination of its character.

Is it the cut rate special, or is it the prime feature on the menu? Or, are all fish treated the same way, with equal dignity and respect, as on the menu at the Fishery?

Like the disciples of old, we are called first and foremost, to follow Jesus. Following Jesus was in many ways easier for the twelve than it is for us today. They had Him there in plain sight before them. We don’t. They had his words spoken to them. We have to read them. They could ask Him questions. We have to rely on each other for guidance, direction, information, and even inspiration.

But like the first four and the whole twelve, we are called, as Christians, to follow Jesus. And like them, we are called to be fishers of folks as well, to bring others to Jesus.

Saint Augustine says that “Fisherman Peter did not lay aside his nets but changed them.”

I saw a bumper sticker the other day that said “Follow me to such and such church.” Well, the car was in the drive-through lane at a fast food place. I wonder how long I’d have to follow that car to find the church. I’m sure, several times a week, that car and its passengers go to church. You wouldn’t put such a sticker on your car otherwise, would you?

I see a lot of cars in our church parking lot, and around town, with our decal on them, identifying them as belonging to First Presbyterian Church of Marianna. I can’t remember who I was riding with, but some time ago I was headed over towards Tallahassee, and a car passed us with a Jackson County license plate, and one of our stickers. Neither of us in the car recognized the vehicle, but we were headed the same way, and felt good about seeing another one of our church folks on the road.

It isn’t just the ruling elders we will install this morning, and it isn’t just teaching elders like me who are called to follow Jesus, who are called to be fisher folk. It is all of us. May our walk in life, and our drive on the highways of life, be such that folks will follow Jesus, and maybe even follow us to Him.

Let us pray.

O Lord, use us to bring others to Jesus, to catch them every day, to show them the way, in His name we pray. Amen.