

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 26, 2014
Third Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Amos 3:1-8
Psalm 139:1-17
I Corinthians 1:10-17
Matthew 4:12-22

Our Gospel lesson today finds Jesus heading North to Galilee, where he will begin his public ministry. Jumping into the proverbial waters with both feet, Jesus begins with this signature message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

As he does, he finds Andrew and Simon, and later James and John, as they are hard at work fishing. And he calls to them and says: “Come with me, and I will teach you how to be fishers of people.”

If I were to take a poll this morning, I would suspect that most of us here find it a little hard to *identify* with Andrew, Simon, James, and John. We *admire* them no doubt. But we struggle to *identify* with them because of the sudden and radical way that they leave their lives as commercial fishermen to follow Jesus.

Personally, I’d like to think that there is some sort of context here, that these men have had some time and experience with Jesus before this lakeside encounter. Many scholars now believe this to be the case. But that is conjecture. What we do have in front of us is the text, in all of its bluntness and brevity. “At once” they leave their nets. And, “immediately” they leave their father and their boat to

follow Jesus. I don't know about you, but when I look at my life, it didn't work that way. I certainly *admire* these guys. But it's hard for me to *identify* with them.

If I took a second poll today, I think it may reveal that while we may admire these four disciples, most of us don't feel particularly "called" by God or Jesus. We sometimes struggle to see how God is interested or involved in what we do in the daily grind of our "jobs." This only serves to add to the difficulty we may have in *identifying* with Andrew, Simon, James, and John.

But what exactly does Jesus call these men to be and to do here?

The answer: He calls them to become "fishers of people." I know the NLT says "fish for people" here, but I don't particularly like that rendering. I like "fishers of men," or "fishers of people" because that seems to me to focus more on *identity* rather than *function*.

Jesus does not call these men to become "emissaries of the kingdom." He does not call them to become "disciples of the Messiah" or "witnesses to the divine." He calls them to become "fishers of people." Those other things may be implied, but in this moment Jesus is not calling these men into *work*. He is calling them *into relationship*.

Jesus calls these men into relationship – with himself, with each other, and with all the people they will meet in the months and years to come.

That changes things. Because if Jesus' focus is on *relationships* and not just roles and functions, then perhaps *our* sense of his "call" on us might come into sharper focus.

I believe Jesus' call on *our* lives is similar to his calling of these first disciples. He called them -- and he calls us -- to be in genuine and real relationships with the people around us. And he calls us to be in those relationships the same way he was in relationship with those first disciples, and the way he is in relationship with us: by bearing one another's burdens, by caring for the weak and the vulnerable, by holding onto each other through thick and thin, always trusting in the hope of God's abundant grace.

Jesus calls us (as he did them) to be in Christ-shaped relationship with others. Sometimes that relationship will take us far from home. At other times, it will take shape amidst the people who are among us and around us. But his call always involves *persons* – not just a mission or a ministry or a movement, but flesh and blood persons.

Now, if you're still having difficulty seeing yourself as "called" by God or by Jesus, think of it this way: *Jesus called ordinary people right in the middle of their ordinary lives to be in relationship with the ordinary people all around them, and through that he did extraordinary things.*

Seen in this way, the call of Jesus has each of your names written all over it. You may work nine to five teaching school, or running a cash register, or calling on clients, or waiting tables, or developing software. But that's just your *occupation*. Your *vocation* is to be in Christ-shaped relationship with the ordinary people who make up the fabric of your life. In that sense, you are "called" by Jesus every bit as much as were Andrew, Simon, James, and John.

When Connie and I were in Toronto, I served as an Assistant Minister in a Presbyterian congregation. On their worship folder they printed information similar to the way we do it here at Epworth. On the inside of the folder, the first two entries read like this:

Pastor: Rev. Wallace Whyte

Ministers: All the members of the congregation

I've never forgotten that. It constantly reminded me that ministry is not just the domain of the "professional" clergy. All of us here at Epworth have the call of God on our lives. We've been called into a Christ-shaped relationship with God and with one another. And the reason you show up here week after week is so that you can become apprentices in fishing. And the kind of fishing we're doing involves casting a wide, strong net of grace over our circle of influence, allowing Jesus to help us, and lead us, and teach us.

If you are here today, and you think that because you are a banker, a shipping clerk, an insurance broker, a small business owner, a customer service

rep, or a civil servant, that God's call does not apply to you, you could not be more mistaken. The call of God is all over your life. What Jesus wants you to see is that his call for you is centered around *relationships*, not roles or functions. He wants you to be in relationship with him, and then to let that relationship spill over into every other relationship in your life.

As we come to the Table this morning, I invite you to come with faith. Listen for his voice. He is calling you by name, just as he did so long ago on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Ordinary people, called to be in relationship with other ordinary people. And from that, Jesus does *extraordinary things*.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.