

Sunday Sermon
January 22, 2017
“Fishing with Jesus”
Matthew 4:12-22

Introduction

No doubt it feels to you and, without a doubt, to your staff like a long time since Michael Bailey’s last Sunday in mid-November. It feels to me like a long time since I was standing on the Queen Street bridge, the main street bridge for the city of Kinston, watching the flood waters of the Neuse River rise around the business of one of my church members, when I received a call from area code 828 with a man named Louis Vinay inquiring if I might be interested in coming here as interim pastor.

I do not remember exactly what I said. I think it was a jumbled bunch of words about sandbags, members’ homes flooded, businesses threatened, and the Army Corps of Engineers at my church. The voice in the phone said, “You can call me back.”

I thank you for waiting as I helped in recovery and sadly officiated at funerals, many related to the storm and flooding. Today, on my first Sunday preaching here, the Session of First Presbyterian Kinston is meeting after worship with members of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to consider becoming a host site for mission teams doing long term recovery work from Hurricane Matthew. Who knows? We may end up sending mission teams there to work.

And here we are joining each other in transition to new chapters in ministry and mission for us.

When I read today’s gospel lesson, I was reminded of the story of the woman who took a call to serve as pastor of a small country church. This was the first time the church had been served by a pastor who was female.

Among the congregation was a man who wished the prophet Joel had not said, . . . “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. (Joel 2:28-32)

What really bothered the man was he figured the woman did not fish. And he had always taken his pastor fishing. So he, wanting to keep tradition, and she, seeking to please her new parishioner, found themselves planning a fishing excursion.

She tried to fake it, but it quickly became evident to the fisherman that his pastor knew very little about fishing. He had to help her bait the hook. He had to show her how to cast a line, how to reel in the catch, and of course, how to take the fish off the hook. His fishing was interrupted by her inexperience.

It was a chilly morning, and to add to his exasperation, she began to comment about the weather and regret that she had left her jacket in the car.

“Well, I’ll just pull up anchor and take you back to shore to fetch your jacket,” the man said,

“Oh no, that will not be necessary,” she said. And with that she stepped out of the boat and walked across the water to the shore.

The fisherman shook his head in disbelief and said to himself, “Wouldn’t you know it; she can’t swim either.”

I do know how to fish, and I can swim . . . halfway. And you will quickly learn that I cannot walk on water.

I

Jesus has been baptized by his cousin John at the River Jordan. But now Jesus learns that John is in prison, arrested by King Herod. And Jesus realizes that he must begin his ministry.

Glenn Monson says this is Matthew's record of the inauguration of Jesus.

We have his inaugural address, one line: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," and the formation of his Cabinet, the calling of the first disciples.

Jesus travels to Capernaum by the Sea, of Galilee and he sees two brothers, Simon, later called Peter, and Andrew. They are casting a net into the sea, fishing. Then he sees James and John in a boat with their father Zebedee. They are mending fishing nets.

Now it is likely that these men had been disciples of John, and when John was arrested, they went back to their professions of fishing. So understand that these men are not fishing for recreation, not for rest and recuperation. This is their work, their jobs. This is everything our careers are to us. This is how they put food on the table, how they pay their bills, how they identify themselves.

And Jesus, walks up to them and says, “Come with me, and I will show you how to fish for people.”

II

Let me ask you something, “Have you caught anybody lately?” It seems so ordinary, so unspectacular, Jesus just going out and telling these fishermen that he is going to teach them to fish for people. And yet, I expect this is how most of us here were brought into the kingdom, through utterly unspectacular methods.

Some of us were put here by loving parents. We cannot remember when we have not been in church. And some of us are here because we were invited by a friend, an acquaintance.

Have you reeled anyone in lately? Do you know that when people are asked why they are not active in a church, the primary answer given is, “No one ever

asked me”?

They do not say, “Well, I would come to church, but I have some real misgivings about a couple of lines in the Apostles’ Creed.” They do not say, “I do not come because I have some doctrinal disagreements with the pastor’s interpretation of scripture.

No, it is simply, “No one ever invited me.” Our most recent edition of the church newsletter says eighty-two percent of the unchurched are likely to attend church if invited. But only two percent of church members say they invite unchurched individuals to church. The fish are out there waiting.

III

Notice Jesus does not say, “Come follow me, and I will teach you to have scholarly religious discussions.” Instead he says, “I will take what you already know how to do, and I will use it for the kingdom of God.”

Jesus meets people where they are, calls them in terms they understand, and turns their everyday abilities into adventures for the kingdom. He calls ordinary people right in the middle of their ordinary lives to be in relationship with the ordinary people all around them and through that does extraordinary things—and he is still doing it.

I want you to think about the times Jesus has come to you. I expect it was not through something spectacular, but rather through some simple act. Then I want you to think about those things you already know how to do: Make a casserole. Befriend a child. Drive a car. Make a phone call. Paint a wall. Those things you know how to do, and that is what Jesus wants you to use in fishing with him.

Conclusion

Jesus comes to the seaside villages and homes of Galilee, where the people are trying to make sense of the law, the commandments, the teachings of the prophets, and the presence of the divine in the middle of the daily give-and-take of families and births and deaths and quarrels and hopes and disappointments.

And he invites them to do something they understand and know how to do—go fishing with him. They do not know where they are going fishing or where all of this will end up, but they know they are going with Jesus and they are together, and that is enough.

We are not sure exactly how this interim time is going to go. But we are going to fish together as a team called First Presbyterian. And I have no doubt Jesus will take the ordinary things we do and turn them into extraordinary adventures for the kingdom. And we will have some great fishing stories to share. May Jesus go with us on the journey.