

Fishers of Men

Mark 1:16-31 (ESV)

July 7, 2002

“Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” Here is both a call and a promise. Here is both forgiveness and a second chance. Here is both reconciliation and a new purpose for life. Here, indeed, is grace and more grace, more than we can imagine, more than we deserve. What are we going to do with it?

“Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” “*Follow me!*” After all these years during which we have been running the wrong direction, the Son of God appears to us now and says, “Follow me.” Despite our sin and rebellion, Jesus Christ calls us to himself, calls us his very own, and with these words draws us near to himself. “Follow me!” The words are so simple, and yet so full of healing. He could have said, “I do not know you; you are not mine.” He could have said, “Get away from me!” He could have said, “I never want to see you again.” He could have said, “You deserve much worse.” But he did not say any of that. Instead, Jesus said—not to his “first disciples,” for when he said it they were not yet his disciples, but to those whom, *by* saying this, he made into his first disciples—Jesus said, “Follow me.” And so today, by the very reading of this gospel, Jesus says to us—not because of our deservingness, of which there is none, but because of our neediness, which is great—so Jesus says to us, “Follow me.” And by these words, he is making us his disciples yet today. He is reaching through our brokenness. He is reaching across our rebellion. He is smashing through our self-centeredness. He is healing our deepest wound. He is coming to us in our loneliness. He is putting a claim on us. Indeed, by these simple words—imperative words of commandment, gracious words of invitation, performative words constituting us as new beings—by these simple words Jesus is forgiving our sin, calling us to himself, reconciling us to God, and therefore reconciling us to each other. Thanks be to God!

“Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” The calling has a purpose. It has a meaning. It has a direction and a reason. God in Christ is calling us together not simply for the enjoyment of our company and not simply for our solitary salvation but also and even more so to call us into life, to put us to work, to involve us in the gospel, and so to help us help each other. He gathers us as the church, and he disperses us as still the church. As the church we gather around him to worship, to learn, to be fed, and to pray, and as the church we go forth to spread the good news, to proclaim the gospel, to issue the call in his name, and to gather others back here again as the church to worship, to learn, to be fed, and to pray.

And this is not something we do in addition to following Jesus. This is following Jesus. Of course, there is no fishing without following, but also there is also no following apart from this fishing. That is, we cannot be disciples of Christ and behave as if evangelism were optional. Evangelism is discipleship. Without evangelism, there is no discipleship.

Are we doing this here at Grace Covenant? Have we become fishers of men? Having heard the call of Jesus Christ to follow, are we carrying that call to others, extending that invitation to our neighbors, reaching out to the lost, the lonely, and the confused, and challenging the strong, the well, and the healthy? Are we ringing doorbells, knocking on doors, calling up friends, and E-mailing acquaintances, inviting them here in the name of Christ? Are we using the newspaper, the radio, the television, and the Internet to our best advantage? How are we getting the word out? What are the results? Where are the people? When Jesus returns, and we are asked to make our final report, what shall we have to say for ourselves about the diligence of our efforts, the zeal of our work, the eagerness of our calling, and the effectiveness of our fishing?

It is said of Simon and Andrew, “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” It is said of James and John, “They left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.” Surely these very responses were miracles in and of themselves! This kind of obedience is not a simple human possibility. These are actions initiated and sustained by the grace of God. These men left behind the old world and stepped forever into the new world. Jesus called them disciples and so they were. What, if anything, will be said of us? Have we heeded the call of Christ and followed him? Has the grace of God taken hold of our lives, never to let go? Has not Christ called us, too, to be disciples? Are we not, therefore, disciples, by his sheer say so? Not all Christians are to be apostles. Not all are to be professional evangelists. Not all are to be ministers, elders, or deacons. But all Christians are to be disciples, and all are to become fishers of men.

It is significant that Simon and Andrew left their nets and followed Jesus. James and John left their father, Zebedee, sitting in the boat and followed Jesus. Christian discipleship is demanding. It may be expensive. We leave one realm of existence and enter another. Yet we find that this new life is the life for which we were created. None other compares.

Simon and Andrew, then James and John—these were the first disciples of Jesus Christ. With them, God began his reconciliation of the world to himself. With them, Christ began his church. With them, Christ began the evangelization of the world. With them, God began the unbroken chain of witnesses which has reached all the way to us. By means of this reading, we are brought close to observe this ancient miracle. But even more than that, by means of this reading we are brought

close to share in this miracle today. The word of God read and spoken today is no less real or powerful than the word of God spoken by Christ then. Indeed, Christ is present in his gospel today, calling even us to follow him, naming us his own disciples, reconciling us to God, to himself, and to each other. It is no less of a miracle now than it was then. God is reclaiming us as his own, regathering us from the farthest recesses of the universe, restoring us to right relationship with himself.

Simon and Andrew, then James and John—it is not insignificant that Jesus called these men in pairs. Yes, they were brothers. Yes, they were working together. But something more than that is going on. Jesus does not simply call us into individual relationship with himself but also into reconciled relationships with each other. Again, this is not an option. This is not an extra. This is not something over and beyond the entry level Christian life. This *is* the Christian life. To be Christian is to be called into the community of Christians. To be Christian is to be called into the church of Jesus Christ. At first the church had two members, then it had four. Soon it had twelve, then thousands, then millions. At *no* point did it have only one. Nor can we be Christians alone today. We are joined to each other, smelly fishermen though we be, into something much larger than ourselves. Here at church we worship God, sing our praises, affirm our faith, make our prayers, give our offerings, and hear the word of God read and preached. Here we know and experience God's reconciliation of us to himself and therefore to each other; apart from here, we know nothing and have nothing.

Having called his first four disciples, Jesus hurried on to teach the word of God in the houses of worship, to cast out unclean spirits which challenged him, and to heal the sick in their homes. Those who heard him teach recognized his authority. Even the unclean spirits recognized his divinity. The healed rose from their sick beds and served him. All of this poses the questions for us: Do we recognize his authority today, even over us? Do we continue to teach his word gladly? Do we, in the depth of our being, know who he is, clearly, unmistakably, beyond challenge, so that we know that we belong to him now and forever? Do we extend his healing into the world? Are we ready to rise and serve him?

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To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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