

Net Work

Preached FCCW, January 21, 2018

Text Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen.

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.

Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Back in the 1960's there was an off-Broadway play called "The Fantasticks".

On its soundtrack was a ballad entitled "Try to Remember."

The song ended with the words, "follow, follow, follow..." trailing off into silence without ever completing the sentence.

There was something about the open-endedness of that verse that I found maddening.

I wanted to know who or what I was being asked to "just follow," and where this following was supposed to lead me.

Follow, follow, follow...what!?

But the songwriter stubbornly refused to satisfy my curiosity.

Jesus' invitation to Simon, Andrew, James, and John seems to have been equally as open ended.

Walking along the Sea of Galilee's shore, Jesus picked out these four fishermen, and with a single phrase drew them away from their families and livelihoods.

"Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

Mark uses his favorite word -- "immediately" -- to describe the response of these pairs of brothers to Jesus' calling them.

No mulling things over or weighing the pros and cons of doing what Jesus asked.

Only simple willingness to follow.

What was so irresistible about Jesus' invitation to these men?

We are only told that Jesus had been publicly preaching in the area a message of repentance and belief in the good news that the Kingdom of God was breaking through into their world.

I guess that was enough to motivate the first disciples, without their having to know the particular details about where Jesus would lead them if they just followed him.

I have to confess that I am a lot less impulsive about such things.

I spent years wrestling with a call to ordained ministry before I finally acquiesced to placing my life at Christ's disposal.

That decision to follow, just follow Jesus, has already taken me many places I wouldn't otherwise have known.

One of the most unforgettable, was a mission trip to an isolated mountain village in Honduras, named Guinope.

Given the choice, I'd really rather have cast my nets in someplace with more creature comforts than Honduras, which ranks as one of the poorest nations in the Western Hemisphere.

Left to my own devices I would naturally gravitate to a setting where cold showers, spiders lurking in bed sheets, and drinking water that threatens to wreak havoc on digestive systems are not daily realities.

I might have been as hesitant to make such a journey as old Jonah was to go and preach to the Ninevites.

But God, whose wisdom is only eclipsed by His sense of humor -- did not issue me an itinerary of where Jesus would lead me.

Only one direction: Follow me. And I will make you fish for people.

And only one message to try and remember: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

What net were we to cast on this mission trip?

What would it mean to say to the people of Guinope that the Kingdom of God is near to them, when so many of them lived in poverty?

How were they to believe in the “good news” when bad news stalked them in the forms of diseases such as cholera, hepatitis, and TB?

And what form does repentance, (which literally means a change in direction) take, when life presents few options to break out of the pattern one is born into?

Intertwined in the search for answers to these questions lay our conviction that if people of faith believe that the Kingdom of God is truly near, and if the presence of the Kingdom includes justice and well-being for all, then it cannot be acceptable that so many people in places like Guinope are excluded from those things.

When Jesus summoned the first disciples he promised that in exchange for them laying down their fishing nets, he would make them into fishers for people.

In other words, Jesus framed his invitation in a language that they could understand and respond to.

Peter and the others could visualize themselves casting nets, no longer to draw fish from the sea, but drawing people into the dawning reality of God’s purpose for them.

What sort of nets did our missionary team have at our disposal that might draw the villagers of Guinope more fully into God’s Kingdom?

What would fishing for people look like for us?

One thing there was no shortage of in Guinope, was evangelization.

There was the old Catholic Church, a modern Evangelical church, and Pentecostal “house churches” on every corner.

The mission objective we felt called to pursue was to cast a net that we hoped would draw more of the village children into the promise of a better life beginning with their participation in the educational system.

Very few of the children were able to attend school.

Either their family couldn’t afford the cost of mandatory school uniforms and supplies, or the economic reality of children’s labor being essential to the family businesses of harvesting and preparing coffee beans rendered the hours spent in classrooms an unaffordable luxury.

The *easy* parts of our mission were getting the local school principal and teachers on board with our vision, and providing the supplies and uniforms the children needed in order to qualify for enrollment.

The main challenge lay in convincing the parents to permit their children to benefit from the opportunity of an education that they themselves had never experienced.

The nets we cast were not over Galilean waters, but in dirt poor, overcrowded, one room homes, as we went out in pairs to visit the households of children who were eligible for the program.

And with each visit we became aware of how we ourselves, in listening to the parents hopes and doubts, were being drawn in to a deeper understanding of what a tremendous act of faith was required of them to allow their sons and daughters to participate.

Not so different from the sacrifice that Zebedee might have felt when his sons James and John left the family fishing business behind to follow Jesus.

Repentance for these mothers and fathers would literally mean turning away from old cultural ways and moving in unexplored directions.

There was no guarantee that their children's education wouldn't lead them far from village and family for a more promising future in Tegucigalpa, or even in the United States.

After we had made all the home visits that we could, the day came when families who opted to be part of the program would meet with us in the school cafeteria.

As the minutes ticked towards the appointed hour, our team of missionaries sat alone, facing rows of empty chairs.

Waiting to see what kind of outcome resulted from our "net work."

At first, a few mothers with their children trickled in.

Then more and more until there was not an empty seat in the cafeteria.

Still, they came.

Until there was not even standing room inside to fit anyone else.

Those who were left outside crowded the open windows to see and hear what was happening inside.

After the meeting was over, mothers brought their children up to greet us.

An American family in our mission team who had a child with Cerebral Palsy at home, found a common language of understanding with a Honduran mother whose son had the same disease.

The children showered us with pictures they drew, with hugs, and with letters that would have to wait to be translated before we could understand them.

One thing though, needed no translation.

The Kingdom of God had come nearer to us all, in a humble schoolhouse that day.

And not because of our being heroes and benefactors sharing our knowledge and material abundance with them.

We who had arrived as Christ's fishers for people found *ourselves* unexpectedly drawn into the Kingdom by a net of love, hospitality, and the wealth of spirit in this people.

And the miracle of it was, that all of us who had eyes to see and ears to hear, recognized that what we gave and what we received all came from the same hand of God.

I returned from Honduras with a deeper understanding of the meaning of the Kingdom of God.

Which is, that the Kingdom of God is nearest and the time is fulfilled wherever true networks of people, believing in the good news Christ proclaimed, and repenting of the false creeds that divide us, are buoyed on the ocean depths of God's love.

And that, accepting Christ's call to follow him into the reality of that Kingdom is not a predictable or a singular event.

It seldom comes with a well-marked road map but frequently presents us with unplanned detours.

The verb tense in the Greek with which Mark wrote his gospel makes this clear.

When Jesus proclaimed that the time of God's Kingdom was fulfilled, he was not saying it had arrived all at once, but that it was continually manifesting itself in new and unforeseen ways.

And when he urged others to repent and believe the good news, what it really said in the Greek was, keep on repenting, keep on believing.

The Kingdom is arriving, arriving, arriving, so we must, like the old song said, just follow, follow, follow where Jesus leads us.

Because, in the following, we too are being drawn deeper into the mystery of God's Kingdom.