

## *Cleaning Fish*

Season of Reconciliation/Third Sunday after Epiphany

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Text: Mark 1:14-20

I want you to sit back, put your imagination caps on and think about an ancient society from over 2000 years ago. Imagine living in a world where you are ruled by a tyrant. Imagine that the very government charged to protect YOU, one of its most vulnerable members, instead enacts policies that deepen your marginalization instead of freeing you. Imagine a world where the wealthy elite monopolize industry and natural resources through tax breaks, bribes and benefits. Imagine a place where the small farm, shop, or fishing business you owned that allowed you to feed you family and put a little aside each month in savings, is usurped by big business and now structured to keep you in poverty. Imagine living in a society where the government has said there is only one way to worship and if you don't engage in the same sort of practices as us, you are ostracized, imprisoned, or even tortured and killed.

In some ways this society feels like a world away and in some ways this society feels eerily familiar, doesn't it? This is the setting for our gospel story today and our fishermen are part of what the Roman politician Cicero describes as one of "the most shameful and least respectable occupations one can have". How ironic it is that this description comes from a politician, one whom some of us today might describe as one of the least respectable.

Now Imagine there is no freedom of speech. And Imagine your cousin was just imprisoned for publicly speaking prophetic, non-violent words critiquing the moral practices of your tyrannical leader.

What would you do?

While our scripture today says "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God", my version might read "Now after John was arrested, Beth went to her basement never to return" or even more accurately, "Now after John was arrested, Beth went to her computer to Facebook about it".

But Jesus is not me, hallelujah. Jesus is the kind of leader who looks oppressive threats in the face and says repent and believe.

Jesus is the kind of leader who sees tired, raw, and despised fishermen and says the last shall be first, follow me and see.

Jesus is the kind of leader who sees abused sex workers, women called property, black lives told they don't matter, the disabled called unclean and banished from their communities, the voiceless children, the refugee fleeing for freedom, the foreigner told they don't have the right papers, the teen girl who says "me too", and the person on the verge of being stoned to death because they don't love the right person.

Jesus SEES all of these people. Jesus CALLS all of these people together and says the kingdom of God begins here, with you, right now. Though this world calls you a disgrace, I call you my church.

This, friends, is called incarnation. This, friends, is what is called the Good News of the Gospel. Its Jesus entering into what some describe as countries named by unmentionable adjectives and declaring it good. Or as theologian James Cone says, "The gospel is found wherever poor people struggle for justice, fighting for their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Let us not cheapen the Good News of the Gospel by calling it any less than Jesus binding together the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, and those the world calls wretched refuse and declares **HERE** is where I establish the foundation of my kingdom. Here. And here is where we come to know and love Jesus.

I don't know about you, but this is the kind of Jesus I want to follow. This is the Jesus I'd be willing to leave my fishing career behind for. The Jesus who says "no more" to injustice and sacrifices his whole self for setting the oppressed free, is the Jesus I'd go people-fishing with. Though our good world is diseased and disgraceful, we are not without hope, the good news of the gospel guarantees this.

Last week Pastor Jill exhorted us to read Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's Letter from a Birmingham Jail. And in that letter Dr. King says,

"Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained." Amen.

This is the street address of the Kingdom of God. God finds the most hostile living environment known to humanity and says this is where I build my house.

So now we must ask ourselves about the risks we face in following this Jesus. Because Jesus didn't risk his life in this dangerous place and say "repent and believe" to simply get us to buy fewer lottery tickets, drive at the speed limit, speak politely to our parents, or refrain from mowing our lawns on the Sabbath. This Jesus, the Jesus of Dr. King, Sojourner Truth, and Dorothy Day knew what many of us have not understood. That following Jesus, repenting and believing, involves handing our whole selves over to Jesus that we might be reoriented and refined to co-create with Christ in the holy work of redeeming this world. Because every fish Jesus catches also needs to be cleaned. Following Jesus means handing over our goals and our failures, handing over our areas of pride and shame, handing over our whole beautiful broken selves, so we have room in our hands for a cross.

When a friend of mine, Rev. Fred Harrell, planted what is now an RCA church in San Francisco in the 1990's, their small leadership team started with a simple yet profound goal in mind. They asked themselves "where is the biggest need in our city and how can we meet it?" After a bit of research, they learned that AIDS hospices in the city had little to no volunteers on Sundays. In fact, one hospice administrator said to them that Sundays were the loneliest days of the week there. Despite the inconvenience of giving up a traditional day of worship and taking on a social issue that was still a deep controversy during that time, they handed convenience over to God because they knew that this is where they were to follow Jesus. This was their cross. They began volunteering at hospices, eventually taking on all of them in the city on Sundays, to ensure that Sundays became the BEST day of the week.

When minister and activist Shane Claiborne began The Simple Way community in Philadelphia it was to care for and live with the homeless in Philadelphia. Shane galvanized people in the effort to battle unjust laws against the homeless, laws that prevented people from sharing food with them on the streets or laws that essentially made it illegal to be homeless, to even exist as a person. They handed over to God the ease and privilege inherent in following the law, even an unjust one. Despite the cross of being arrested and jailed, this school of fish eventually got the ear of judges and officials and changed the law.

What about here and now? What about Holland? Surely there are countless ways we can reorient and redeem our community. Just this past Thursday night, the Holland

city Human Relations Commission, which I recently joined, spent quite a bit of time talking about DACA recipients, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, an Obama administrative policy that aims to protect undocumented minors in our country and give them work permits. There is concern in our city about what will happen to the 14,000 Michigan recipients of this program when the program begins to be rescinded on March 6. These young people are students at our schools and colleges, they have good jobs, they pay their taxes, and now they risk being separated from their families and livelihoods should they be deported to their countries of origin. This same crisis is being grappled with among multiple faith based and community groups in Holland, including clergy and Hope Church members sitting right here with us. What conveniences needed to be handed over here? We do not yet know exactly what will happen, but the time is now to prayerfully watch where Jesus leads us in the midst of this.

The path of Jesus is not a simple one. The work of reconciliation, unity, and peace doesn't just happen. The work of non violent direct action is disrupting and difficult. It speaks truth to the Herods of the world and expects to be arrested for it. It grants forgiveness to a person and then expects leaders to plan your capture. Non Violent Direct Action crosses a bridge in Alabama and is not surprised to be met with a billy club. It might even block the front door of a home in Detroit or even Holland, when authorities try to deport an undocumented father trying to support his family, even if it means we are arrested alongside him. When Jesus went about this work, the powers that be were talking about executing him by the third chapter of Mark! This is the way of the cross we pick up, church. The way of Christ is transformative and redemptive, but it is also costly.

The cross of Jesus is heavy. The cost of following Jesus is deep. Let us humbly ask Jesus where he is leading us, but let us also pray together, listen together and care for each other in order that we do not grow weary. Hope Church, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. Let us drop our nets and follow Jesus. We've got bigger fish to fry.