

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Mark 1:16-20

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
Sunday, January 25, 2009

Casting Call for the Chosen

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is presented as the truly divine Son of God who functions by the power of God, delivering humanity from all the evils, which is God's intention. These verses are in three subsections, each of which uses the "call" vocabulary, and each of which illustrates the calling, commissioning, and sending of the disciples.

The first fifteen verses of Mark tell us Jesus is God's messianic king in the long-awaited kingdom of God. The heavens are opened; the Spirit descends to empower Jesus with God's own power; the devil is met and overpowered. All the pieces are in place and ready for this opening scene.

Jesus is the subject of most of the verbs in this passage. The disciples are not seeking Him. Christ finds and calls them.

With the initial call of these disciples, Mark's story moves from introducing Jesus to introducing His ministry. These verses actually contain two brief call accounts, one of Simon and Andrew and the other of James and John. Given the brief story Mark usually tells, he might have planned to combine these into one small scene. Because he leaves them separate, he calls our attention to the importance of the events.

Jesus cannot accomplish His mission alone. Christ seeks friends whom He can trust, disciples whom He can teach, and co-workers who will share His

task. After announcing the Good News, Christ begins selecting a few good men.

Unfortunately, in those days, only men would be chosen as disciples. Females of any age are not considered to be important by male counterparts. They are considered property, by those other than Jesus, as first of their fathers and then of their husbands, or brothers, or masters if they are sold as servants. So Christ only chooses men as disciples. We do know Christ has many females who follow Him as well and are listed in the Bible as disciples even though they are not part of the original twelve.

As His selection process begins, Christ determines what qualifications to seek in Simon, Andrew, James, and John as He walks among the fishing boats along the Sea of Galilee. He understands fishermen are not wealthy but are people who work with their own hands; neither are they the poorest of the poor – they own their fishing boats and have houses and employees, probably comparable to middle-class business people of today.

Mark says nothing about the motivation of either Jesus or the disciples. Why does Jesus call this particular foursome? What leads them to respond to Christ? Nothing in the text provides an answer to either question; and, nothing indicates they have any prior knowledge of one another.

Jesus calls, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of people,” as the basis for selecting His followers. Those who answer are asked to be trustworthy, teachable, and task-oriented.

According to Mark, Jesus' words, "Follow Me" are the first actual words the readers hear Christ say. In His words, "Fish for people," the imagery is multi-layered. In this time and place in the world, fishing is a metaphor for teaching; in the Bible, fishing can be an image of judgment, or of participation in God's work of restoring the people of Israel.

According to David McKenna, a Biblical scholar, Jesus' words "Follow Me" are sometimes considered a test of trust. Along the lines of trust flow loyalty, confidence, and openness. If that line is cut or frayed, all other relationships deteriorate.

It is necessary for Jesus to trust in the men whom He chooses. Ironically, Christ calls Simon Peter first; and it is Peter who breaks the line of loyalty when he denies His Lord. In that tragic moment, Jesus looks at him as if to say, "Peter, I trusted you." One look speaks a thousand words. Peter goes out and weeps bitterly. Loyalty is the first qualification for discipleship.

Jesus also chooses men who are teachable. When He calls, "Follow Me and I will make you fishers for people," Christ promises a life-long learning and growing experience. Not by accident, He chooses unschooled and unsophisticated fishermen. We want to remember Jesus knows what He is doing. He wants teachable men without intellectual ideas and cultural mindsets which would be barriers to truth.

Christ's learning principle seems obvious. It is easier to learn than it is to unlearn. Jesus chooses men who seem to have little to unlearn. Like hungry baby birds with their mouths wide open, they have nothing to stop or slow

the process of becoming “fishers of people.” I remember when I began seminary several years ago. I asked the pastor of my then home-church what advice he would give in my new adventure. He advised me to become like a sponge and to soak up everything. I followed that advice, almost literally, throughout seminary; and I loved every minute of my studies! Teachability is second only to trust.

Jesus also looks for men who are task-oriented. He says, “I will make you become fishers for people.” This speaks volumes about the task to which the disciples are called and the results which can be accepted. Jesus knows the skills required to catch fish, and He does not hesitate to compare them to the skills of catching people. Fishing of both kinds is a science and an art. Without the disciples having learned skills and the intuition of natural gifts, the net will come up empty. For His disciples, Jesus wants men who have learned the science and sensed the art of fishing. Why? He is selecting men who are ready to live by the “bottom line.” Fishermen fit that description. If they do not get a catch, they starve; but if they exercise the discipline of scientist and the sensitivity of artists, their nets come up full!

A leader rarely calls followers to a one-way commitment. The leader-follower relationship is a covenant. When Jesus calls, “Follow Me,” He does not presume that He is the Master with the expectations all on the side of the disciples. With equal force, Christ is saying, “If I can trust you to follow, you can trust Me to lead.” Jesus Christ makes a commitment to be their role model.

Christ also agrees to be the mentor of these teachable men. He commits Himself to all the pains and all the pleasures of being a teacher, watching men who are sometimes sharp and sometimes dull; sometimes growing by leaps and sometimes regressing by bounds; sometimes succeeding, but more often than not, failing in order to try again.

By choosing task-oriented men, Christ commits Himself to be the *manager* of their tasks. A manager is like the conductor of an orchestra. He knows the limits and potentials of his players. If he pushes them beyond their limits, they may falter in frustration. Somewhere in between is the delicate balance where the leader makes the difference. Christ possesses an uncanny skill at reading the readiness of His disciples for service. On their first field trip as “fishers of people,” they return with eyes as big as saucers to report, “...even the unclean spirits...obey Him.” The next time out, they slink back to Christ asking, “Why could we not cast him out?” Jesus makes a commitment to bring along those whom He calls at a pace equal to their skills until they qualify as “fishers of people.”

Beverly Gaventa writes that observations about what seems to be “missing” from this passage in Mark may lead to other observations about what is present here. First, Jesus issues a call which is authoritative. Unlike modern-day teachers or philosophers who compete to attract students, Christ is presented here as one who issues a summons which is not to be refused. The simpleness of His invitation contrasts ironically with our own consumer society, in which everything, including faith is thought to be a commodity to be packaged and marketed. Jesus Christ does not play by the rules of a consumer society!

Second, the call Christ issues is responded to without hesitation. We wonder why. Here may be the most puzzling feature of this passage: why do the fishermen “immediately” leave their business and family to follow Jesus? Possibly they see being a disciple of Jesus as a substantial promotion, a step to bigger and better things. There is nothing in the text to indicate the disciples receive any reward for being disciples. If anything, they are promised the possibility of persecution and conflict.

It is possible the disciples anticipate that fishing for people will be more satisfying somehow than the fishing to which they are accustomed. Sometimes these verses of Mark’s are read as a contrast between the worldly occupation of catching fish and the spiritual occupation of fishing for people. Nothing in the story prepared those who are called to understand and respond to the contrast. As far as these fishermen are concerned, they, in fact, are giving up an occupation with a secure market for one which is very unknown.

Beverly Gaventa, again, writes that Mark does not even make it clear to us whether the fishermen respond out of faith. Mark does not say they believe in Jesus or understand His mission. These important characters seem to persistently misunderstand Christ. To make matters worse, they run away and disappear entirely when He is arrested, tried, and crucified! Whatever they understand at this point in Mark’s Gospel, the disciples eventually forget.

There is nothing in these verses to tell us why the fishermen do what they do, why they leave their nets, the hired workers, and instead follow Christ.

Somehow they seem compelled to follow Him, a man whom they cannot and do not understand, on a journey which will puzzle and confuse them, to a destination as yet unknown. The fishermen, now disciples, act in faith – not a faith which understands, takes only calculated risks, or seeks after payment or reward, but a faith which responds to a call from outside, a call which remains unclear and sometimes even frightening.

What is the “flair factor” which separates Simon, Andrew, James, and John from all the other fishermen who hear Christ’s call? It is the ability to make a clean and firm decision. In each case, Mark invokes his seemingly favorite word, “immediately,” to describe the fishermen’s response to Jesus’ call. Mark’s repeated use of “immediately” (about 42 times) assures us that the men whom Christ chooses for His disciples are able to make firm decisions.

It is important for us to note and remember that calling people is what God does to make prophets, but not what Rabbis do to gain disciples. Early Christianity uses the language of “calling” to express how people would become Christians. So the phrase, “those who are called” refers to the act of God in calling them, not to their own freedom and responsibility. The word for “church” in the New Testament literally means “called out ones” and is related to the word for “call.”

When we read that the disciples left their boats, their nets, and their families, we are reminded that the call of Christ has higher priority than even the most sacred family obligations. These men do not pause, reflect, weigh the advantages and disadvantages, and compare Christ’s teaching, which they have not yet heard, with other teachers, but without a word begin to follow.

They do not even ask where they are going. They will learn along the way. There are no psychological explanations offered: Mark is presenting a scene in which the essence of becoming a disciple is powerfully shown. In this first part of Mark's miracle stories, we see how the power of God changes human lives.

Today, Jesus Christ continues to call for trustworthy, teachable, and task-oriented people to be His disciples. In return, He promises to be our role model, our mentor, and our manager. Our covenant with God is the secret of winning the world.

Our journey of faith begins with this step, as does the ministry of Jesus. Responding to Christ provides the disciples with no answers for their life struggles, only questions. Following Christ provides them with no security, but provides them instead with rejection and even danger. The identity of the One who calls, remains concealed and misapprehended, even by them. Nevertheless, they respond and follow Him.

When Christ calls us, how do we respond? Are we willing to be trustworthy, teachable, and task-oriented so we will drop everything and follow Him? Unlike these first disciples, through the Bible, Christ does provide us with answers for our life struggles along with questions. Christ does provide us with security, sprinkled sometimes with rejections and in some places in the world with danger. Still Christ calls us and anxiously wants us to respond and follow Him. May we each think about what we will do so we are ready to respond to Christ's call. May we each be trustworthy,

teachable, and task-oriented to receive Christ into our lives and to follow Him always! Amen!