

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany 2015  
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The reading from First Corinthians is kind of disturbing, isn't it? Paul seems convinced that the last judgment is coming soon, and he directs the followers of Jesus to live as if the only thing that matters is the present moment, and everything that is concerned with the future – weddings, funerals, hopefulness, and even grocery shopping, should be set aside to prepare for Jesus' return.

We know that Paul was wrong about that – even he figured it out eventually – and so we are faced with the task of figuring out how to follow Jesus without giving up our necessary concerns for the world, our community, our families, and ourselves.

So since we're concerned with how to be followers of Jesus, let's consider the Gospel lesson, since it talks about the first people who decided to follow Jesus. It's a story densely packed with both action and symbolism. The arrest of John the Baptist and Jesus' taking up of John's message and ministry, the calling of the first disciples, and even the work they were doing when they were called – all of these things are not, in Mark's Gospel, just narrative, just "what happened," they are the symbolic context for understanding the meaning of the events of the gospel story as well.

John's arrest is not just the beginning of his tragic end, it's also a foreshadowing of Jesus' destiny. The powers that be object to John's message of repentance, and in Mark's gospel, Jesus begins his ministry with the exact same words that got John in trouble with the authorities.

But let's focus on the calling of the disciples. This is a different version of the story than we find in John's gospel. There, the disciples approached Jesus after they were pointed in his direction by their soon-to-be-former rabbi John the Baptist. In Mark's version, it is Jesus who goes recruiting, approaching the fishermen as they sit on the shore, mending their nets.

There is so much symbolism here that is hard for us to grasp from a two-thousand-year remove. In Jesus' day, students always approached the teacher, seeking permission to sit at the master's feet and learn. The mere fact that Jesus comes to them, that Jesus calls them, is a sign that Jesus is not going to be any ordinary rabbi, and that his students are going to do more than just listen and learn. Jesus' invitation is full of action words. Instead of "sit with me, listen and learn," Jesus says, "Come with me, follow and serve."

In a way, it's not very different from Paul's call to the Corinthian Christians.

Andrew and Simon and James and John also gave up all the activities and concerns

of their lives, but, and this is an important difference, they did it not to wait for Jesus, but to do the work he called them to.

And what was that work? To fish for people. Or, to use a word that few Episcopalians are fond of, to be evangelists – to tell the Good News about God to anyone who would listen.

And that's the exact same work to which we are called, as a church and as individuals. To shout the Good News from the housetops. To tell it to the ends of the earth. To make believers of all nations. To build up the Body of Christ.

And it's not that we're not trying. We continue to do all the things churches did when we were young that built and confirmed our faith. It's just that the things we know how to do don't seem to work as well anymore. We are used to raising our children in the faith, but we don't know how to convert them to the faith. And we don't really do any better with adults. The mainstream denominations have never been very good at evangelism. Our operating institutional assumption is that people will have acquired their relationship with God somewhere else, and that our mission is to teach them the ways of our own particular community – our style of worship, our way of leadership and governance, our community structure.

God has touched all of our lives here—that's why we're here. We follow Jesus, and we know the joy of working for the kingdom and praising God from whom all

blessings flow. But throughout the church that joy, that spirit, is dying with us. We are not doing a very good job of spreading the Word, or bringing the Good News to the end of the block, let alone the ends of the earth.

If we are to be fishers of people, our nets need a lot of mending.

And it's interesting to me that the Greek word Mark uses for "mending" is the same word that Paul uses when talking to the church in Corinth, for "uniting." Just as James and John are mending their nets, Paul wishes that the church in Corinth be "mended" in the same mind and the same purpose. Or try substituting another possible translation: "making whole." James and John are making their nets whole again, and Paul is wishing that the Christian community in Corinth be made whole again.

Which makes me think that maybe, in being called to fish for people, that Jesus is calling his followers not to be the fishers so much as to be the net. A community is, after all, very like a net – cords of love, affection, respect and service tie us one to another, and it is the network of relationships – the web of different ties that each of us has to overlapping but not identical groups of people that bind us into a community. If our communities are nets, then each relationship – each friendship, each marriage, each familial bond, each collegial or business relationship is a knot in those nets. The world is held together by nets of love, and each loving

relationship makes the net stronger and denser, able to hold more and hold it more securely.

And also like a real net, its strength is dependent on the strength of the individual knots. When one knot breaks, it puts extra stress on the knots around it, making them more likely to fray and break as well. And you know, from your own experience, that this is true for our net of human relationships as well. Any broken relationship – enmity, family feuds, divorce, office intrigue, sibling rivalry, puts a great deal of stress on all of those who are connected to the people whose relationship is broken. Families, workplaces, communities, can be unraveled by a few broken knots in the net.

So if we are to be the nets by which Jesus fishes for people, we need to be mending ourselves. We need to be strengthening the ties that bind us to one another in mutual love, affection and service. Speaking the truth in love, we need to resolve our differences considerately, and when we do not yet see how to resolve our differences, remain in respectful relationship with those with whom we disagree.

If we can do that, then there is a better chance that when Jesus casts us as a net into the world to gather in our children, our neighbors, and strangers alike, that those Jesus brings into our communities will stay.

Amen.