

The 3rd Sunday after Epiphany: Holy Trinity Church: January 22, 2017

Matthew 4: 12-23: *Follow me, and I will make you fish for people*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, sometimes it is a good thing to catch someone else's dream. Today's Gospel story I all about the men and women who got close enough to Jesus to catch his dream. Doesn't it amaze you how quickly the disciples left their fishing nets to follow Jesus? Matthew tells us that Jesus was in Capernaum. John the Baptist has been arrested and now sits in Herod's prison. It seems more than coincidental that upon hearing of John's incarceration Jesus begins his own ministry of preaching taking up, as it were, where John left off preaching a message of repentance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew, casting a net into the sea for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." And Simon and Andrew left their nets, and followed him. And going

on, he saw another set of brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with their father, mending their nets; and he called them. And immediately, Matthew tells us, they also left the ship and their father, and followed Jesus.

Doesn't that seem rather abrupt to you? What, no discussion? No "we'll think about it and get back to you tomorrow?" No "don't call us; we'll call you?"

Could we not say that these four fishermen acted rather impulsively?

Evidently, they were caught up in Jesus' dream. Doesn't their impulsiveness suggest certain real truths? I believe there was something about Jesus that

impressed them so much, they just had to act quickly. There was something special about Jesus, some indefinable quality that set him apart. Those four

fishermen, Simon, Andrew, James and John got excited when they met Jesus.

They left their families. They left their jobs. They left everything important to them for a very uncertain future as his disciples. There must have been

something very special about Jesus.

I believe there also must have been something about Jesus' dream, his vision.

Jesus came preaching that "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." What was there about that Kingdom that got these fishermen so excited? And why are

we not just as excited? Maybe we don't understand what the kingdom is. Or maybe it just hasn't been presented very well.

It reminds me of a story I read about a woman who read somewhere that dogs were healthier if fed a tablespoon of cod liver oil each day. So each day she followed the same routine. She chased her dog until she caught it, wrestled it down to the floor, and managed to force the fishy remedy down the dog's throat. Until one day when, in the middle of this grueling treatment, the bottle was kicked over. With a sigh, she loosened her grip on the dog so she could wipe up the mess. To her surprise; the dog trotted over to the puddle and began lapping up what had been spilled. The point is this; the dog loved the cod liver oil! It was just the owner's method of treatment the dog objected to. Frequently, I think that something like that has happened to the good news of the Kingdom of God. It has been so poorly presented to us that we have never been captured by its attractiveness and its power.

Jesus had a vision for the world, a dream, a picture of how life is meant to be. I believe, Jesus saw a world where God ruled in every heart. Jesus saw world of righteousness, peace and justice. Jesus dreamt and had visions of a world of love and harmony and unity. Sure, Jesus talked about heaven and life in the hereafter but he also had a vision for this world. He called it the Kingdom of

Heaven or the Kingdom of God. And Jesus said that this kingdom is at hand. It is available. It is not merely a distant dream. It is a present possibility. Every once in a while we catch a glimpse of that kingdom.

My Church History professor in the seminary once described the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit during the Welsh Revivals of the nineteenth century. As people sought the infusion of the Holy Spirit they did all they could to confess wrongdoings and to make restitution. This unexpectedly created severe problems for the shipyards along the coast of Wales. Over the years workers had stolen all kinds of things. Everything from wheelbarrows to hammers had been stolen. However, as people sought to be right with God they started to return what they had taken, with the result that soon the shipyards of Wales were overwhelmed with returned property. There were such huge piles of returned tools that several of the yards had to put up signs that read, "If you have been led by God to return what you have stolen, please know that the management forgives you and wishes you to keep what you have stolen."

Wouldn't you love to see that kind of revival sweep America? Couldn't you get excited about a world in which people began making restitution for their wrong doings? Couldn't you get excited about a world in which you could

always trust people to do the right thing because God lived in their heart?

Couldn't you get excited about a world without child abuse? Couldn't you get excited about a world without murder? Couldn't you get excited about world without divorce and broken families? Couldn't you get excited about a world without alcoholism? Couldn't you get excited about a world without drug addiction? Couldn't you get excited about a world without fear or poverty or disease? Couldn't you get excited about a world like that?

My sisters and brothers in Christ, the disciples got excited. They were swept up in Jesus' dream. They believed such a world was possible and they gave their lives to see it become a reality. The disciples got excited about the role they would play in bringing about the realization of Jesus' dream, the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Jesus said to them, "*Follow me and I will make you fish for people.*" They knew all about fishing for fish, but Jesus was calling them to something far more significant. He was calling them to introduce men and women to this kingdom of love, this kingdom of power, this kingdom of heaven on earth. They would not be passive spectators of this coming Kingdom but active participants. And they would make a difference, a lasting difference in their world and in individual lives. No wonder they were excited. They were going to help change the world.

When the missionaries were forced to leave China in 1951, and Christians began to be oppressed by the Communist government, the future of the church seemed bleak. In the preceding decades of western missionary work, many of the approximately one million Protestant communicants had become "rice Christians," accepting the forms of Christianity more for personal gain than genuine conviction. When the pressures began to mount, they soon fell away. With the coming of the Cultural Revolution and the suppression of all institutional religious functions, it seemed that Christianity in China was doomed. Yet during this period of terrible persecution, committed Christians, not afraid to defy the principalities of this world, began to meet secretly in their homes. When regular church services were outlawed during the "Great Leap Forward," these informal cottage meetings became the primary structure of the church. As their priests and pastors were murdered or imprisoned, members of the laity came forward to provide leadership. Women especially took an active role. When their houses were searched by the Red Guards, and all the Bibles and Christian literature destroyed, the people drew upon their memory of Scripture and shared experiences to build up one another in the faith. As the Christians in these small groups displayed extraordinary courage, zeal, and love, the gospel spread to their neighbors and fellow workers. Freely they gave their own food and clothing to the needy

and poor especially to those whose breadwinners had been killed or thrown into prison. They visited the bereaved and prayed for the sick, often seeing God miraculously heal. Typical was the way some believers cared for a Communist school teacher who became seriously ill. So genuine was their compassion, that upon her recovery she, too, accepted Christ, only to suffer public ridicule on return to her work. Required to appear at a public "confession" meeting, she protested: "When I was ill, you did nothing to help me. It was the Christians who did everything!" That fact shamed her critics into silence. Today the church of Jesus Christ in Communist China is alive and growing because individual Christians did their part to be fishers of men.

My sisters and brother in Christ, our challenge this week is that we need to see that the Kingdom of Heaven is still at hand in this world. It remains a very real possibility wherever there are followers of Jesus who are willing to live out that which they believe. Holy Trinity Church is called to be an active participant in bringing about the Kingdom of God. The torch has been passed on to us. The dream never dies and God's work goes on. There is something very special about Jesus' dream. It is a dream of the rule of God in every heart. It is a dream of a world freed from the grip of man's inhumanity to man. And Christ is still looking for co-workers, men and women who will be fishers of people who will seek to introduce their friends and neighbors to

come and see this Kingdom of Heaven. The question is my sisters and brothers, can Jesus count on us?

Bobby Kennedy once said, “There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why...I dream things that never were, and ask why not?”

AMEN.