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A Call to Serve
Mark 1:20

Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus found Peter, Andrew, James, and John at the Sea of Galilee. They were minding their own business, practicing their profession as fishermen. Then Jesus called them to take on a new identity as fishers of men. The amazing thing is that they didn't ask questions or raise objections. They climbed out of their boats and followed him. Having received a call to serve, they responded immediately.

Their response demonstrated the spirit of service that our new president invoked in his inaugural address last week. President Obama said:

As we consider the road that unfolds before us, we remember with humble gratitude those brave Americans who, at this very hour, patrol far-off deserts and distant mountains. They have something to tell us today, just as the fallen heroes who lie in Arlington whisper through the ages. We honor them not only because they are guardians of our liberty, but because they embody the spirit of service; a willingness to find meaning in something greater than themselves. And yet, at this moment — a moment that will define a generation — it is precisely this spirit that must inhabit us all.

What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility — a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task. (Inaugural Address of President Barack Obama, January 20, 2009).

There is nothing so satisfying to the spirit as serving others. This is undoubtedly the truth that Peter and the others learned when they got out of their boats and gave their all to Jesus' mission. They set their plans aside so that they could answer the call to serve. They soon discovered that being on the road with Jesus refreshed their weary spirits. It generated within them a level of satisfaction and joy that could not be experienced in any other way. They would never be the same again.

It was this kind of satisfaction and joy that motivated Harriet Tubman. Against all odds she escaped from slavery and made her way North to freedom on the Underground Railroad. But simply enjoying her freedom was not enough for Harriet Tubman. She chose to invest her life to serve others who were struggling to be free. At great personal risk she made nineteen trips back to the South to lead more than 300 people to freedom. There was a sense of satisfaction in that work that made her spirit dance. She said, "I could have freed more, if they had only wanted to be free."

The struggle for another kind of freedom was at the heart of the ministry of Francis Makemie, one of the founders of American Presbyterianism. When he arrived in America in 1683, Presbyterians were not free to organize their own churches in the colonies of Virginia and New York. Presbyterian ministers could be subject to prosecution for preaching the gospel in private homes. By 1699, Makemie succeeded in convincing government officials in Virginia to grant him the right to preach a

Presbyterian sermon in his own residence. This may not sound like much but it was an important step toward religious freedom.

But New York presented a more difficult challenge. When Makemie traveled there in 1706, the governor, Lord Cornbury, refused to recognize the license to preach that had been issued to him in Virginia. Understanding that Cornbury had already demonstrated his desire to persecute Presbyterians out of existence in that colony, Makemie chose a course of civil disobedience. One historian has described what happened in these words:

When Makemie was forbidden to preach...he disobeyed the law publicly, showing a willingness to bear the penalty for his act. He went into a private house, opened the doors and windows, and carried out his ministerial function so that all could see and hear and participate if they so desired. Confronted by this act of civil disobedience, Cornbury arrested Makemie ... and brought him to trial. Makemie obtained a writ of *habeas corpus*. He insisted that the Governor produce and show the court in writing the law that sanctioned the Governor's abuse. Cornbury could not do this, and Makemie won his case. For his defiance, however, he spent forty-six days in jail, and he was forced to pay his expenses while in custody, as well as the cost of the trial (James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, page 43).

When the abuses of Lord Cornbury were exposed through Makemie's trial the governor was removed. Makemie's strategic use of civil disobedience and legal challenge became a model for the American civil rights movement two hundred years later.

Makemie could have enjoyed a more pleasant life if he had stayed on his plantation in Virginia. The forty-six days he spent in a New York jail undoubtedly contributed to the illness that ended his life a year and a half later.

But Makemie understood that the source of his satisfaction and joy was a call to serve issued at the Sea of Galilee. As our mission statement makes clear, that is our call, too.