

Sermon – “Mending Nets”

Sunday, January 22, 2017

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23

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In our first scripture reading this eighth century BCE prophet Isaiah announces good news to the Northern Kingdom of Israel which was under the brutal rule of Assyria. Their lives were not only trivialized by those who held them captive but also by their brothers and sisters in the Southern Kingdom who looked upon them with contempt. The prophet talks about a later time when God’s presence would break into their darkness. In this new presence their lives would not be trivialized, which is the net result of contempt. In this new presence, they would be taken seriously restoring their dignity and well being—a cause for great joy.

*But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time God brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time God will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*

*The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.  
You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.  
For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

In our second scripture reading, Matthew 4:12-23, Jesus begins the ministry that his baptism announced in Galilee where he withdrew following the arrest of John. The religious rulers who arrested John despised Galilee, which was considered lacking in religious privilege. By going there Jesus’ work would likely not be interrupted, but more importantly for Matthew this journey is a fulfillment of the Isaiah prophecy we just read.

By proclaiming the good news of “the kingdom of heaven” in Galilee, the former Northern Kingdom and now a gentile region, Jesus affirms that God’s mercy is wider than the sea. In God’s new presence, all life is glorified and taken seriously— the Hebrew without religious privilege as well as the Gentile who had no privilege at all. In “the kingdom of heaven” lives that were trivialized by the contempt of the religious elite are not only taken seriously but also glorified, restoring their dignity and well being—a cause for great joy.

For Peter, Andrew, James and John it was a cause worthy of changing the direction of their lives. Leaving behind their fishing nets, their boats, even their father they followed Jesus. Hear now the Word of God.

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup> so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

*“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

*As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.*

*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*

The title of the sermon: “Mending Nets”

*The text: “As Jesus went from there, he saw two other brothers...mending their nets, and he called them.” Matthew 4:21*

Let us pray. Gracious God, thank you for calling each of us in the wideness of your mercy. Help us never to take ourselves so seriously that we trivialize the experience of others. As we reflect together on the meaning of this scripture, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Norman Maclean wrote about growing up on Montana’s Big Blackfoot River in a short story which later became a film entitled “The River Runs Through It.” He shares memories of his father and brother with whom he fished and draws parallels between the art of fly fishing and the art of living. He writes:

*“In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing. We lived at the junction of great trout rivers in western Montana, and our father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others. He told us about Christ’s disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman.*

*“It is true that one day a week was given over wholly to religion...Even so, in a typical week of our childhood Paul and I probably received as many hours of instruction in fly fishing as we did in all other spiritual matters.... As (my father) buttoned his glove (on his casting hand) in preparation to giving us a lesson, he would say, “It is an art that is performed on a four-count rhythm between ten and two o’clock.”...My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy. So my brother and I learned to cast Presbyterian-style, on a metronome. “*

Not unlike Norman and Paul Maclean, many of us in our mind’s eye picture these first disciples fishing with rods. They may not be fly fishing rods but none the less we picture rods because

this is our culture's experience of fishing. The truth is Andrew and Peter were not fly fishermen and John was not a dry-fly fisherman.

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible discusses fishing. We are told that unlike today: *There is no evidence that the Israelites engaged in fishing for pleasure or sport. To them it was hard work. The job, in addition to catching the fish, included salting and peddling the fish, as well as mending the nets and sails and keeping the boats in repair.*

*Several methods of fishing are noted in the Bible ...Fishhooks have been used from prehistoric times in Palestine and Egypt. Bone fishhooks...Iron fishhooks...originally a thorn was the fishhook. The hook and line are noted in Isaiah. However, there is no mention of a fishing rod. There were two types of fishnets. One was thrown by hand usually while the fisherman was standing on the shore. Perhaps Peter and Andrew used this method, while the sons of Zebedee used the dragnet. A larger net was used from the boats and was operated like a sieve from a circle of boats closing in to one another."*

And so when Jesus asked these fishermen to follow him he chose a metaphor from their life and work, which he knew they would understand because they had immersed themselves in the art of fishing. It was their livelihood. It was their world. They knew how hard the work was and the skills needed to do the work well. So did Jesus. By meeting them in their world and speaking their language Jesus not only affirmed their work as fishermen he also doesn't cut them any slack. The new task to which they are called will be equally difficult and require skills to do the work well.

In this encounter with Andrew and Peter, James and John we experience part of the richness of Jesus' teaching ministry. He met people where they were and spoke about the "kingdom of heaven" in ways they could understand. His teachings are full of metaphors from everyday life in first century Palestine.

The fish metaphor, however, took on a life of its own for the early followers of Christ. During the later part of the first century and the second century Christians were persecuted and the Christian community was forced underground. The symbol of the fish drawn discretely on the road with one's sandal was the means by which they communicated who they were to each other. The jumbled letters of the Greek word for fish, "Ikhthus," abbreviate the early Christian confession: "Jesus Christ, God's only Son, my Lord and Savior." During high school and college I wore the symbol of the fish as a necklace to affirm my personal confession.

When Jesus used the metaphor of fishing he didn't have the image of the fishhook or rod in mind as if they were to hunt people down and reel them in unknowingly. In Jesus' mind's eye he saw his future disciples along the Sea of Galilee gathering the fish in a net and he envisioned these capable young fishermen gathering people together from all walks of life, especially those whose lives were not in the mainstream of society, whose lives were trivialized. He pictured them gathered in a net broad enough that there was room for all who responded and mended in such a way that no one would slip through the cracks.

Jesus saw these young fishermen mending their nets and he envisioned his future disciples healing lives that are torn apart by wear and tear, conflict and tragedy. Jesus knew that mending nets is tedious and detailed work, and that this mending takes time and an industrious spirit. Jesus foresaw how lives damaged by neglect and circumstance could be repaired and restored to the wholeness intended for each one of God's children. The good news of the

kingdom which Jesus proclaimed is that God values and respects each one of our experiences. Even as Jesus met the fishermen by the Sea of Galilee, he meets each one of us in our life situation. There is no burden too heavy, no sorrow or despair too deep, no emptiness too wide for the breadth and depth and width of God's love and mercy.

When we are swept up in the sea of life's unpredictable circumstances, the sustaining net of God's mercy gathers us in and gives us a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. As citizens' worthy of this kingdom, we are called to embrace a new set of values within our relationships. With Andrew, Peter, James and John we are called to follow the teachings of Jesus, to learn the rhythm and art of a grace filled life. This does not come easily but is learned over time with discipline, practice and love.

In the coming weeks we will take a closer look at the Sermon on the Mount which is the most comprehensive collection of Jesus' teachings in the New Testament. These teachings give us the guidelines for the kingdom of heaven and an understanding of what is required of us. Namely, that the One who has redeemed us, the one who values and respects our human experience asks us to do the same for one another. When we start to move beyond our own self-interest and learn to value and respect the experience of one who is different, without judging or feeling superior; when we stop trivializing the pain of others because we do not understand or are afraid of our own and reach out in compassion; we are beginning to understand what is expected of us in the kingdom of heaven.

On this historic weekend as many gathered in Washington, D.C. for the President's Inauguration and as women and men gathered in cities across the country the following day, Christ's message of respect and unity is especially timely. Today, we gather in solidarity to affirm our faith in the One who called the first disciples on the Sea of Galilee and who invites each of us to partake in the kingdom of heaven. Celebrating the wideness of God's mercy and working together to mend broken relationships, let us take heart in the words of President Lincoln at his Second Inaugural address on March 4, 1865 just before the end of the Civil War and his untimely assassination.

*With malice toward none, with charity for all... let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.*

By the grace of God, may we continue the difficult and tedious work of mending lives and relationships as we strive for unity and a lasting peace. Amen.