

## “What Happened?”

A sermon on Mark 1:14-20  
preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
at Concord Presbyterian Church, Statesville, NC  
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“Only fifteen percent of American congregations have grown by even one person in the last five years, according to the Parish Paper newsletter.” <sup>(1)</sup> That was the first sentence of a recent *Christian Century* editorial: an editorial written by Presbyterian pastor John Buchanan, an editorial I passed out to our new elders and deacons at our officer training a few weeks ago. Only *fifteen percent* of American congregations have grown by even *one* person in the last five years. Think about that for a minute.

The editorial went on to offer some reasons for churches’ decline and plateau, but it suggested that perhaps the main one is that clergy and lay leaders fail to put evangelism on their congregation’s agenda. There are a host of reasons for this: from the negative images some of us have of people who have witnessed to Christ in a judgmental or off-putting way, to people’s sense that sharing the Gospel is harder than it is, to folks’ fear that if they share the Gospel they will be put down or made fun of for doing so. But Buchanan says that those reasons don’t make evangelism any less important.

In this church, I suppose we’ve put evangelism on the radar screen, but that’s mostly been in the form of discussions among a few of us about how we respond to visitors once they come through our doors, and in the mailing of brochures, introductory letters, and newsletters to folks who move into several local zip codes. Those things are surely worthwhile, but they don’t really get to the core of evangelism—which is sharing Jesus Christ with others—inviting others into a living relationship with the loving God. That’s evangelism—and before his editorial was through, that’s what John Buchanan, pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago (as mainline a church as you will find in the United States)—was advocating is an essential task *of every single Christian*.

There’s a reason he was doing so—and that reason goes beyond the crisis of declining or plateaued membership in so many churches. The reason is, that as Presbyterian-flavored Christians (as Christians period), we are called to take the Bible seriously—to let it’s Word engage us, challenge us, even transform us. So let’s look at that text I just read from Mark’s gospel—the call of the four fishermen.

The first chapter of Mark doesn’t waste much time getting us to that call. John appears, preaching in the wilderness. Jesus is baptized and then tempted in the desert. Bang, bang, bang. What it takes Matthew and Luke four chapters to do, Mark accomplishes in thirteen verses. Then all of a sudden, John is arrested and Jesus begins his public ministry in Galilee. “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand,” Jesus says, “Turn your life around and believe the good news of the gospel.” Two quick verses. That’s all Mark gives to Jesus’ statement of his evangelic mission. And then, boom—Jesus calls four fishermen to help him with his task of sharing good news by becoming fishers of men—and they immediately get out of the boat and they follow him.

That’s the *Reader’s Digest* version of what is already a pretty abbreviated story. But how rich in insight it is. This week, as I pondered that article in *Christian Century* and looked at the call of those first four disciples, it occurred to me that three things are true of them that are also, I hope, true of us. They are *necessary*. They are *ordinary*. And they are *willing*.

First, those first four disciples are *necessary*. Notice again how quickly Jesus moves to calling them. Right after Jesus starts proclaiming the kingdom of God, he's calling disciples to help him (at least that's the way it reads). Sure, Mark might have left some material out of his telling. There might have been a long lull between when Jesus started his ministry and when he called those guys out of their boats on the Galilean Sea. But the fact that Mark leaves out any mention of a lull suggests that he wants to make a point. Jesus *needed* those men to help him with his earthly mission.

There's a wonderful tale that I've shared from this pulpit before about one of the angels greeting Jesus after he ascended to heaven. The angel asked him about how his work was going to continue now that he was up there. And Jesus said, "Well, those surviving eleven followers that I left behind, they'll continue what I started." The angel said, "What if they fail? What if they don't work out? What then? Surely you have a back up plan? And Jesus said, "Nope. There is no back up plan. Those guys are it."

Now we know from scripture that those eleven, together with some other followers (women among them), stuck with it until the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost. And the Spirit empowered them to carry on Christ's mission—which was to share the good news. They did it so powerfully that the Book of Acts says that day by day new members were being added to their midst. The early church was just fulfilling what Jesus called those first four to do—they saw themselves as fishers of men and women.

Our task hasn't changed friends. Just like in the first century, if the good news of God's love in Christ is going to get proclaimed and expressed, human beings like you and I are going to have to do it. I have a *Family Circus* cartoon on the wall of my study that shows one of the kids, arms splayed out, saying, "Our arms are the only ones' God has to hug people." Now it's not strictly true that God has no hands and arms but ours in the world—God can certainly do all kinds of things without us. But both that *Family Circus* cartoon and this text from Mark suggest that the God we know in Jesus Christ *needs* you and me to be his agents in the world. He needs modern day Andrews and Peters. He needs Lauras and Ashley's and Bills and Bonnies and Verlins and Mildreds and Erics and Stacies and Brittanys, and Merediths, and Katies. You are an important part of his plan. The Apostle Paul puts it this way, "You are members of the body of Christ." You and I are a living embodiment of Christ in the world—we are necessary. Your gifts, your talents, your time—are necessary to God's work in the world. And that applies to evangelism as well: if people are going to encounter God's love, if the body of Christ is going to grow in this place, it is necessary for you and me to show and tell the love of God—not just to each other, but to people out beyond our fellowship. Outside these walls. It is necessary to invite others into the body. It's not likely to happen any other way.

Something else occurred to me about why disciples like you and me are necessary in God's plan. That's because God wants us to know the joy that comes along with sharing the good news of God's love. That's why we're necessary. Maybe God could do it without us. But God wants us to know joy. That's why we're necessary.

The second thing to note about those first four disciples is that they are *ordinary*. They are just fishermen, out on the lake, trying to make a living. They were most likely not educated, nor were they wealthy. They were just regular guys, common people. They probably weren't even the best fishers of fish out there on that lake and here Jesus was calling them to be fishers of men.

Why'd Jesus start with ordinary folks like that? Why not start with the chief priests and the scribes, the wise and learned Pharisees, the trained ones who spent their days delving into God's law? Why not start with them? Why start with four common, smelly, uneducated fishermen?

Here again, there's a point to be made about Jesus' mission—the good news he came to proclaim and the good news we try to share from this pulpit week after week after week. The point is this: you do not have to be extraordinary for God to love you and use you. In Christ God meets us and loves us and values us just as we are—surveyors and saw sharpeners, chicken farmers and teacher's assistants, housewives and tech workers, secretaries and salesmen, principals and plumbers. Ordinary folks.

See, God's love for us—and for God's world—has nothing to do with our achievements, our socio-economic status, our profession, our intellectual prowess, or even our morality. It is based in God's grace—the grace that Anne Lamott says “meets us exactly where we are and loves us too much to let us stay that way.”<sup>(2)</sup> That's good news. Those four fishermen heard that news and they got out of their boats and started to follow the one who would make them fishers of men.

The wonderful Latin American hymn, “Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore,” the first verse of which the choir will be using as a benediction today, puts these words in the mouths of the fishermen. “O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me, and while smiling, have called out my name. Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me, now with you, I will seek other seas.”

Why'd they leave their boats? I suppose we could come up with a number of reasons, but I like to think it was because of the way Jesus looked at them. They were more than ordinary fishermen to him. They were precious children of God. How many people had walked by those four (maybe even good religious folks like the Pharisees) and failed to see them as anything more than the function they filled? But Jesus looked at them and valued them as more than what they did. He loved them—not for what they did, but for who they were: precious children of God—and he saw them transformed into what they would become in God's plan.

It's not just first century fishermen that long to be looked at that way, friends. It's the single mother waitress struggling to make ends meet, with all kinds of trouble and without a whole lot of support structures. It's the kids in Rio de Janeiro that live on the gang-infested trash heap known as the City of God. But it's also people right here in this community. It's the college student who is afraid to fail—or even make a B—because somewhere in his gut he believes that his worth as a person is tied to his success in the classroom. It's the high-schoolers who think they have to be thin to be in. It's the store clerk who gets treated like dirt by her customers, and her family, and her spouse. It's the man who has been a good, hardworking church member all his life, reputable and respected, who secretly wonders if he's done enough to earn God's approval and other people's acclaim. It's the person who can't shop enough, or work enough, or drink enough, or amass enough money, or sleep with enough partners to fill that hunger inside. A hunger that can only be filled by the love of the God we have come to know in Christ. The Jesus who looked on ordinary fishermen and let them know—you don't have to be extraordinary to be loved and accepted and used by me.

That's a message that some people are literally dying to hear—they're *dying* to hear it—and one place they can hear it is in the church. Sometimes I wonder if we don't take the message a little too casually—if we don't take it for granted—those of us who have grown up in a church setting. Sometimes I wonder if we've really gotten it—or perhaps we've grown immune to it, this message of grace. Maybe little doses of it make us immune. I don't know. But it's what we have to offer the world—it's what makes Christianity unique among all the major religions of the world. Every other one of the other religions is at some level about what human beings can do to earn God's love and approval or what human beings can do to work their way into a state of enlightenment. But

Christianity starts with grace extended to people in their ordinariness, their brokenness—it begins with grace—and moves on from there.

Jesus looked on those four fishermen in love and he invited them (not forced them) to follow. He didn't berate them. He didn't threaten them. He simply loved them and said, "Come and follow me." There's a lesson for evangelism in that, too, I suppose.

Which brings us to the third thing that the text suggests about the four fishermen, and that is, they were *willing*. They were willing to follow. They were willing to do the work of being fishers of men and women. They made that choice.

One way we know they were willing is because they *immediately* got out of the boat. They could have waited around. They could have said, "Well, you know, get back to us on that Jesus, we may go. We may not go." But they immediately got of the boat and followed. They heard "Come and be fishers of men," and they got out *and they did it*. They were enthusiastic about it. They were willing.

Which raises a question. What about us? Are we willing? Are we willing to get out and be fishers of men and women?

And lest you think that's not a Presbyterian idea (there's certainly plenty of scriptural basis for it), but lest you think that's not a Presbyterian idea, listen to these words from our Presbyterian Church U.S.A. *Book of Order*:

First, the responsibilities of elders. A. A. Not b, not c, not f, not i, not z.

a. to provide opportunities for evangelism to be learned and practiced in and by the church, that members may be better equipped to articulate their faith, to witness in word and deed to the saving grace of Jesus Christ, and to invite persons into a new life in Christ. (G-10.0102)

That's A.

Here's what our Worship Book says. The middle part of the Book of Order. (W-7.2001):

God sends the church in the power of the Holy Spirit

- a. to announce the good news that in Christ Jesus the world is reconciled to God.
- b. to tell all nations and peoples of Christ's call to repentance, faith, and obedience.
- c. to proclaim in deed and word that Jesus gave himself to set people free.
- d. to offer in Christ's name fullness of life now and forever.
- e. to call people everywhere to believe in and follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
- f. to invite them into the community of faith to worship and serve the triune God.

Let me close with these words from John Buchanan's editorial:

"Christians who can't or won't share their faith with others may be in a crisis of faith of their own. The question is whether they believe in the efficacy of the gospel—the gospel which justifies so that we don't need to earn our status before God or vie for position with others; the gospel which gives shape and purpose to life, making us other-directed rather than self-centered; the gospel of peace which reconciles broken relationships and builds community; the gospel of justice which

advocates for the poor and the marginalized. This is good news. So how can one keep from sharing it?"<sup>(3)</sup>

In Jesus' name. Amen.

1. John Buchanan, "Good News" *The Christian Century* Nov 20-Dec. 3, 2002, p. 5.
2. Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1999), p. 135.
3. Buchanan, *The Christian Century*, p. 5.