Go and Fish—Mk 1:14-20

God sends Jonah to Nineveh, a city so large that it would take three days just to walk from one end of it to the other. That’s a lot of people. That’s a lot of people for one man to try and reach. God sends Jesus into the world, as a man, to try to reach a lot of people. We catch a quick glimpse of Jesus proclaiming the Good News very early here in St. Mark’s account: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the Good News” (1:15). All those clauses sound rather mysterious: “the time is fulfilled.” What does that mean? “The kingdom of God has come near.” What does that mean? “Repent.” What does that mean?! “Believe in the Good News.” What’s the Good News??

In a sense, the rest of St. Mark’s account shows us what all these things mean, or at least it begins to show us. At first, though, the words of Jesus sound a bit strange, especially to people who are not used to hearing Jesus speak, people who are not used to the way Jesus speaks. Right now, today, around us, that’s just about everybody who is not in church (not to mention a few who are).

Part of our lives as Christians is figuring out what all these words of Jesus mean, to see how they are working out in our lives together. It’s clear that we were not meant to do this alone. Immediately after we get that first glimpse of Jesus walking around Galilee proclaiming the Good News, we see him calling followers. Jesus knows that he is not meant to proclaim the Gospel alone: he can’t do it alone. The life of faith is life together. Maverick Christians have missed half the message.

One of my mentors once said something as part of a sermon that has remained quite fixed in my mind: he was speaking about those who claim to be Christian but don’t bother to take part in the life of any congregation. The person claims to be a Christian, okay, but how would anybody else know? There is a public dimension to our faith. Our faith has to have a face. If you keep your faith all to yourself, how are you following in the footsteps of your Lord? The first thing we hear him doing is proclaiming the Gospel out in public for all to hear. The next thing we see him doing is calling followers: “Follow me and I will make you fish for people” (1:17). Many translations present the Biblical Greek of Jesus’ words this way: “I will *make you become* fishers of people” (KJV, ASV, ESV, etc., emphasis added).

Publicly announcing the Good News, explicitly calling people to follow—these are public acts, and it is at least partially by such acts that Christians know one another, and that the Lord knows us as his own. Maverick Christians and wallflower Christians are both neglecting vital dimensions of what it means to be a Christian. The Christian who tries to go it alone without a congregation, and the Christian who keeps the faith very quietly all to himself or herself have missed crucial parts of the Message.

We’re also liable to miss a very important part of the message if we just skim over what Jesus says to those who will become his first followers. Let’s not just skim over it and pass on. Let’s linger a while. “Follow me and I will make you become fishers of people.” That’s what Jesus says to Simon Peter and Andrew. He may well have said much the same to James and John. What does he not say, then? Jesus does not say “feed people.” He does not say “sing new songs, but only half the verses.” He does not say “Let’s eat!” He does not say “Memorize verses from the Bible.” He says “Follow me,” and he follows that up with something that sounds like a promise: “I will make you become fishers for people.” Brothers and sisters, you see, the one proclaiming Good News has come to make proclaimers of Good News. The Evangelist has come to make evangelists.

There’s nothing wrong with feeding people, also, with singing, also, with sharing meals, or learning the Bible by heart. It’s clear from what Jesus says later that all of these things are also part of what he encourages his followers to do. Those are all good things to do together. Mission, Worship, Fellowship, and Study are all ways through which we grow together in Christ. The first thing Jesus wants his followers to do is to fish for people, just as Jesus was always fishing for people. In our reading for this morning, Jesus catches four. That’s a huge catch! If any of us were able to catch four in the space of four years, that would be huge! If each of us was able to catch four in the course of four years, now *that* would be huge!

Part of what I’ve been trying to say over the time I have been here is that we are able: we are enabled and empowered by the Holy Spirit for this work, this work of fishing for people. That’s the work to which Jesus calls his first followers. That’s the work to which Jesus first calls his followers. Our first work is catching people. For a very long time the church, our branch of it, anyway, has forgotten that. For a very, very long time, Presbyterians seemed to believe that our first work was worship. And when worship got a little boring or tedious, churches began to shift the focus to fellowship: our first work was actually fellowship. Then all the fellowship activities began at a certain point to feel forced and frequent. Dutiful Christian souls as we were, though, we weren’t about not to attend a church event! Then there was mission. We all know mission is important, and for a long time we had forgotten about mission, or didn’t quite know what to do with it, especially if it was nearby. So we got excited about mission and wanted to place that front and center, and while we were only a small congregation, and could only do so much, well, the little that we could do was not so very little, really, for even if we only helped one person, we would have made a difference. And that’s true! Never lose sight of the truth of that!

At the same time, we all already know that the need will always be greater than our capacity to meet it. There will always be more disease, more hunger, more poverty, more lack of work,

more lives in turmoil than our material possessions and income can address. God knows that. Jesus knows that, and that is why, when Jesus calls followers, he tells them he will make them become fishers for people. The greatest help we can offer, beloved, the biggest difference we can make in the turmoil around us, is not to offer food, or utility assistance, or transportation—helpful as all of those things most certainly are! Jesus has already told us the greatest help we can offer. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe the Good News.

According to God’s timetable, now is the time: the window is open, the hand is extended, opportunity is knocking, now. If God has seemed distant before, He is distant no longer. He is close now, closer than He has ever been. It’s the year of the Lord’s favor, the time when God is fully disposed to show mercy, beckoning, to give abundantly. God is holding open the doors for everyone who will come in, come in out of the cold rain, out of the mess that is this world: messy culture, messy politics, messy lives, messy hearts, messy minds. People probably did not exactly know what Jesus meant when he said the kingdom of God has come near, but Scripture records that there were nearly always crowds around Jesus. People knew something amazing was here in Jesus, with Jesus. He was coming to them, where they were. They did not know exactly who Jesus was, but they knew he said good things, did good things;

and they knew that he noticed them, would stop for them. Jesus was showing his followers what it meant to be his followers, how to be his followers.

That word repent is a Church word. You know yourself that if you try to use it in the world, you get marked right away as a Christian and people stop hearing and sort of go all rigid and angry. That word repent is not a complicated word: it means to be sorry, to regret. Feeling sorrow and regret is necessary, because people who feel sorrow and regret are looking for a way to make up for what they regret, to set right that about which they feel sorry. The one who is calling us to acknowledge our sorrow, to admit our regret, is the very one who can truly do something about it for us: Jesus!

Have you ever felt sorry after drinking a little too much? Have you ever felt regret after having eaten a little too much? Have you ever regretted arguing a little too much? Have you ever felt sorry for causing a little too much hurt? Have you ever regretted the mess you’ve made? The mess in your own life? The mess in another’s life? Have you ever wondered why things are so messy—why you are so messy inside and why you seem to make such a mess? The root is in your relationship with God. Everything is a mess because that is a mess. Begin to work on that relationship, on getting that mess sorted out, and all the other messes will also begin to get sorted out.

Hopefully, God-willing, we already know that much, we who believe, who heard Jesus say follow me, and followed. What about everyone else, though? It’s far easier to do the wrong thing about sorrow and regret than to do the smart thing: invite Jesus in.

Remember, Jesus didn’t just say follow. The period did not come after that word follow. He said, as part of that same thought: and I will make you become fishers for people. That’s also part of how God is straightening up the mess that is my life, your life, our lives. You don’t have to be completely straightened out to start that fishing or even to begin catching. Every experienced fisher has at least one story—and if he’s honest, several stories—of how the novice caught the big one, while the experienced fisher barely caught a thing, that day.

People are convinced that what they really need is more money, or a better job, or better health, or more respect, or a faster internet connection, or the newest iPhone, or to be left alone, or a really hot girlfriend or at least a really fast car, or a really rich husband, or at least a really cute car. Talk to them, and the last thing it would occur to them to have on that list of “things that will definitely make my life better” is God. I’m convinced, though, that what everyone really needs is Jesus. That’s what I needed—and still need! The need does not end once we know Christ! Knowing Christ helps us to feel our need more acutely!

The Good News is that we need Jesus and that Jesus is there for us, fully, completely, right now. Everyone needs Jesus, especially those whose lives are a mess, a mess of their own making and maintaining. Find the mess, and you may just find sorrow and regret. Find that regret, and you may just find a heart ready for Good News about how Jesus helped to begin to set the mess straight in your life. That’s what Jesus does, thank God! Jesus starts cleaning up. He starts by calling you. He starts by calling you to be one who calls, who seeks, who fishes. Every fisher knows he or she won’t make a catch each time. Every fisher knows she or he will make a catch. Jesus came to make you fishers. Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to make you fishers. He does not just say “follow me.” What he says is, “Follow me and I will make you become fishers for people.”

Where? Who? Children who seem to have wandered off the path; grandchildren, cousins, nephews and nieces, brothers or sisters. Dear friends who seem to have lost interest in God, or whose attention has drifted elsewhere, or those friends who never have accepted Christ into their hearts, even after all these years. The couple next door, that nice man down the street, that tired mother and her children, living behind you. These are not strangers. These are not people who will automatically give you the cold shoulder. These are not people who have no place in your own heart. Where to begin? There.

How? By caring about them. People know, they feel, when you really care about them. They also know when you’re just trying to get something out of them. Care about them. Find out how life is treating them these days. Listen to them, listening for the mess, the regret, the sorrow. What is that like for them? Maybe begin to share what you’ve learned about getting lifted out of the mess, and what you’ve learned about the one who lifted you, Jesus. Enter into the give and take of fishing: reeling in takes intuition and a good sense of timing. Always be prayerful. Pray for the ones you are trying to reach; pray that God would show you how to reach them. Be patient, knowing that Jesus is behind it all. He called you. He called you to follow. He called you to follow in order to make you become a fisher. He is making you into a fisher. Go and fish.

And to Jesus Christ, who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, true priests of his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.