

SLD01.25.09 3rd Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Mark 1:14-10
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“Go Fish”

Today we come to the beginning of Jesus’ 3 year ministry in Galilee. Already we have witnessed Jesus’ birth, his baptism, his public blessing by God, his temptation in the wilderness, and his emergence from that wilderness to do what God has called him to do. Now he’s ready to do it.

“The time is fulfilled,” he says anybody who’ll listen. “The kingdom of God has come near.” So “repent,” he says to those nearby. “Repent, and believe the good news!”

And just what *is* the good news Jesus wants folks to repent and believe? That the God of Israel is bigger and more powerful and more unexpected than all the rules and doctrines and practices anybody’s come up with so far. That God’s love and forgiveness extend beyond any particular “chosen people” to all humankind, to all creation. That the only things stand between us and God’s Beloved Community are our own calcified minds and broken hearts, our own clenched fists and pugilistic pigheadedness, our own misguided efforts to control and all the loony anxieties that follow when we fail.

So “repent,” cries Jesus from his first pulpit. “Repent, and believe the good news.”

We assume there are a few people standing around to hear him. Maybe they listen; maybe they don’t. Maybe they get it; maybe they don’t. Nobody seems to stick around to find out. Certainly Jesus doesn’t. Whatever else he may be at this point,

Jesus is most definitely *not* a pastor. An evangelist, maybe. Somebody on fire to get the good news out to as many people as he can. But certainly not a pastor, or a chaplain, or a therapist: someone concerned with how people are feeling; whether they're getting along; whether or not they're happy with his leadership, his message. At this point; really, at any point, Jesus could care less. His job is just to get the Word out. To *be* the Word, of course, but mostly to promulgate. To spread it around. To share it with as many people as possible. Whether or not people listen to the Word, or what they do with it, whether or not they hear it, believe it, or invest any time in living into what God's trying to tell them through Jesus, that's *their* path, *their* choice, *their* life. Jesus' job is just to get It out. So quickly, immediately, according to Mark, Jesus moves out from whoever that first random cluster of listeners was and takes the Word on the road.

Cruising the beach for other Word-sharers, he comes across some guys drawing in a catch of fish. Thinks, "yeah, that's what I'm looking for – people who can draw in a catch, only not of fish, of people. People who can draw in other people with the Word of God."

So he says to Simon and Andrew, "Y'all come follow me and I'll make you fish for *people*."

Okay, so maybe that's not all he says. I mean, he'd have to say more than that for *me* to leave what *I* was doing to go trouncing off following him to wherever. Maybe Jesus actually spends days with Simon and Andrew explaining what he means by "fishing for people." Or maybe it happens the way Mark says it does – "immediately" due to some...I don't know...Ann Morris would call it some "woo woo thing" that goes on

between Jesus and Simon and Andrew. Some...how do the Sufis say it?...some “transmission” of wisdom or insight or revelation that passes from the Teacher to the chosen ones. (If it did, we know it didn’t last for these or any other disciples.) Whatever. “Immediately,” says Mark, Simon and Andrew drop their nets to follow Jesus. And again, later, so do James and John. These rough, crude, uneducated Galilean fishermen drop their nets and follow Jesus to become...what...holier? Wiser? More spiritual? More pious? more Presbyterian? No. They drop what they’re doing in order to be made fishers of *people*. That’s what Jesus wants of them. “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.”

Okay, if you’re paying attention, you gotta know where I’m heading with this. So I just want to let you know up front that I don’t like it any more than you do. You know me – I’m an introvert. I like to be alone. I’m better one-on-one than with large groups of people, unless it’s a setup like this where you all have to be quiet while I’m talking. Otherwise, I pretty much disappear in a crowd. And like it that way. If I even show up in the first place. Late.

“Fishing for people” is not my thing. I don’t even always *like* people, never mind want to fish for *more*.

But Jesus isn’t talking about fishing for people just to increase the crowd. He wants his disciples to fish for people who are actually open, or might be, to repenting of their separation from God and receiving the blessing of the good news of God’s love and forgiveness.

And in this tolerant, multi-cultural, multi-faith world of ours, who wants to impose one’s personal faith on anybody else? Or even *mention* it, for that matter? What a

body believes about God is their own private matter, right? We in this country believe in separation of church and state, separation of church and school, separation of church and workplace. Heck, some folks around here even believe in separation of church and neighborhood! I had one lady Christmas before last to inform me firmly that the church *she* went to left their neighborhood *alone*, a policy she obviously favored. "I just don't believe in mixing the two," she declared. And I felt embarrassed, like I had just inexcusably crossed some social boundary because I dared to suggest we might go Christmas caroling together.

Now I figure the lady has a point. You and I believe so strongly in separation of church and just about everything else in our lives, we don't even talk about our relationship with, or experience of, God with *each other!*

And yet, is there anyone here who is *not* aware of the pervasive hunger in *everyone's* hearts, churched and unchurched alike, for some relevant, real and personal experience of the divine? Of the spiritual? Of that which no faith fully names yet is present in all human hearts, in all loving relationships, in all creation?

Because, friends, *that's* what Jesus embodied. That's it! The Word, the Presence, the Sacred, the Beautiful, the Eternal, the Healing, the Hope, the Alpha, the Omega, the Beginning, the End, the Source, the Process, and the Purpose, of Life itself!

Do you understand? *That's* what Jesus wanted to share. *That's* what he called his disciples to share. *That's* what he calls *us* to share.

Oh, I am so not wired for this! I am so much more comfortable being *with* and *in* the Word than I am in flapping my lips about it, or embodying it, or serving it, never mind in sharing it with people outside the church. Give me a dark, quiet room with a

Paddywax candle the scent of Olive Tree, together with a little Buechner, a little Rumi, some centering prayer and a few Yoga stretches, and you've made my day.

It takes a lot of energy to maintain a church. Sometimes our busyness wears me out. Sometimes our fussiness wears me out. Sometimes I feel deflated by our perennial budget deficit. Worse than any of that, I'm forever finding my personal capacity to be "good," however I or anyone else happens to be defining "good" at the moment, to be distressingly limited.

But here's the news flash I'm hearing from today's text: Jesus didn't call me to maintain a church; he called me to "fish for people." To share the good news. To make disciples. To get out there and let people know the great news of a healing, forgiving, transforming God who doesn't give up on us. A God you and I know through Jesus Christ.

The writer, lecturer, consultant, and Baptist bully, Paul Borden, whom, as many of you know, I dislike even more than the general topic of evangelism, has nevertheless been getting under my skin here of late. You know how you learn more about yourself from your enemies than from your friends?

I listen to or read Paul Borden and mostly think – "oh, shut up." Because Paul Borden is all about Matthew 25, where Jesus says, "Go and make disciples of all nations." And Paul Borden is all about Mark 1:14, where Jesus says, "Follow me and I'll make you fish for people." And Paul Borden is all about Luke 19 where the trustworthy slave makes ten pounds from the one pound that the Master gives him.

And I'm not. And *we're* not. We're more about surviving our budget deficit and maintaining what we've got. Growing our numbers would be nice but we'll be happy just

to get through another year. Well, two years, really, since we've got plenty of reserve to get through 2009 without change. Just not 2010.

But Paul Borden, if he were here (God forbid), he'd call for a Day of Fasting of the whole congregation and staff, so we could repent of refusing to do what Jesus calls his disciples to do - make disciples.

And I'm not kidding. Or exaggerating. He's just done this up at Rehoboth Church where Joel Tolbert is full on working Borden's "prescriptions," the first of which is a whole day of Fasting and Repentance for the whole darn church because they haven't done what Jesus told them to do. It's pretty harsh.

But see, Borden's that clear that Church was not designed to be an institution that merely caters to the demands of its members.¹

He's that clear that the primary purpose of discipleship is reproduction (p. 86), that the primary mission of the church is not to satisfy the needs of its members but to make more disciples for Jesus Christ. That God's chief desire is for more people in more and more places to know God and to love others.

Borden is also clear that in a typical church, too many activities do not advance this primary mission (p. 39). That most churches are too inwardly -focused. That leaders have to make a choice to run the congregation for the current members or for those *who are not there yet*. Or, if we choose both, that but we decide which members get priority - the ones who are here, or the ones who are not?

Borden is clear that most pastors are trained to support the status quo and call individuals to personal discipleship than they (we) are to mobilize a congregation to obey Jesus' Commission to make more disciples (p. 20). But that our primary

¹ Paul Borden, Direct Hit, Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tn., 2006, pp. 37-38.

leadership responsibility...*should* be directed more to the congregation as an entity than to the individuals who comprise the congregation. (p. 23) (I can hardly get my head around that.)

Further he remarks that most churches neither expect nor demand fruitful results from their leaders, and that (this kind of hurts) ((quote)) “the ineffectiveness of most congregations and denominations has led to a theology of smallness that validates our sickly existence.” (p. 25) Ouch. Nevertheless, he says, most churches still shy away from accountability better than any other organization in our society. (Ibid.)

And finally, and this is hard for some of us Presbyterians to hear, a major barrier for most churches effectively to follow their mission is actually embedded in their polity. That the way most churches are structured, what process people have to go through to get things done, slows our effectiveness down more than anything else. He says, and I quote: “most congregations in the United States are designed to be small, remain small, and function ineffectively in the twenty-first century.” (p. 21)

Okay. Enough Borden. I can only take the guy for so long.

But before we leave him altogether, at least for this morning, there are two things I’d like to make clear. First, for all his insight and critique and ruthless advice, Borden neither offers nor intends any general directives for congregational change. [Mind you, hire the guy and pay him a small fortune and he’ll offer a whole slew of extremely specific (and hard to swallow) “prescriptions” for a particular church’s congregational change. He even calls them that – prescriptions.]

But Borden’s overall goal is to challenge churches to be *more missional and more outwardly-focused*, more passionately engaged in the effort of turning lost people (that is,

those separated from the knowledge and love of God) into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. (p. 37)

Secondly, while Borden focuses assiduously on a faithful response to Jesus' great commission to make disciples, let us not sidestep the obvious impact of growing the church. The importance to me is the difference between growing the church for its own sake, for its own survival, verses making disciples for Jesus' sake, because he told us to. There's another point about faithfulness to be made here. God calls churches just like God calls individuals. And for a church to fulfill its call, for *this* church to fulfill *its* call in this time and place, we must have a critical mass of folks to sustain and execute that call. Critical mass is critical...to faithfulness. And anyone who wearies of the demands placed upon them by me or this church knows very well that we do not, at this point, have it.

That said, I confess that I'm not just a whole lot clearer on how to achieve that critical mass than you are. Following Borden's lead, though, I know the first steps, and I believe that we at this church are already taking them.

For example, two years ago we didn't have a Mission ministry. Now we do – a whole gaggle of neat, organized, motivated folks who enjoy serving Jesus through serving others, and inviting people to join them. We are becoming a more missional church.

Likewise, before Ann Morris took the bull by the horns a year or so ago, we didn't have any grand plan for Outreach, either; that is, for reaching outside the walls of this church and improving our fishing skills. Now we have in black and white Ann's dream of

new signage, a more inviting front landscape, and a living lawn full of activities, all aimed at drawing in more people in to become followers of Christ.

And you know, before our Session retreat a couple months ago, we didn't have a mission or a vision statement to orient us. We had a splendid Covenant that describes how we intend to be. In fact, we'll read it together later in the service, as we often do, as our Affirmation of Faith. And we had a cogent Identity statement that describes what we're like as a community – you'll find it on the back page of your bulletin. But we didn't have a mission statement that tells just simply why we exist, why we keep our doors open, why we're sitting here on this prime property. And we didn't have a vision statement with a “gulp factor” that would describe for us what we hope to look like in a few years.

But now, thanks to Tom Tewell and our Session, we have both. Here's our mission statement, the reason for our being:

Emory Presbyterian Church welcomes all persons, nurtures disciples, builds a community of faith, and joins in Christ's work in the world.

That's why we exist. To welcome all people (wherever they are on their spiritual journey), to nurtures disciples for Jesus Christ, to build a community of faith, and to join in Christ's work in the world. That pretty well sums it up, don't you think?

And here's our vision statement, how we hope to see ourselves in a few years:

By 2012, Emory Presbyterian Church will become a congregation of 200. (That alone is a “gulp factor.”) ***Our community will know us for inspiring worship, excellence in music, enriching education, and life-changing service through Christ to the world.***

As our membership grows, we aspire to dedicate an increasing percentage of our resources toward mission and worship opportunities. We will offer exceptional education and small group programs that will inspire biblical, theological and spiritual growth.

Led by the Spirit of God, Emory Presbyterian Church will experience God's love in worship and discipleship so that we can demonstrate God's love in relationship and service.

What other steps have we been taking toward becoming better fishers of people? Today in Session we'll start talking about how we're functionally organized here in this church – looking at things like the size of our Session, the effectiveness of standing committees, how best to engage people in the specific tasks and duties associated with being church. In fact, the Dream Team gatherings of the last few weeks were experiments in picking peoples' brains for ideas and support without making them sign up for a year's worth of committee meetings. And what do you know but that we got a lot of fun and useful stuff out of them!

My point is, already we've already taken a lot of important steps toward following Jesus and letting him make us fishers of people. We have so much going for us in this church: wonderful people who like being with each other, terrific music, enriching worship, a beautiful building, a great location, fun and relevant mission opportunities, a dream for the future, a gifted staff, and an open heart for the Word of God. Who knows? Here before long, we may even start talking with one another personally about God!

What we don't do so well, however, you and I, is go fishing. We're great at welcoming whoever happens to wander into our sanctuary, but we're not so hot at going fishing outside of it. We've got a lot to learn there. And a clear motivation to learn it! Not only did Jesus tell us to go fishing, there's a whole world out there of people hungry to know they're loved and forgiven.

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people,” says Jesus.

And I say, fine. Show us how. Make us your fishermen and -women. Help us like you helped Simon and Andrew, James and John. As we claim your healing presence in our hearts, our hopes, our lives, help us share it with others. It doesn't come naturally to most of us, but in your power and in your care, won't you show us the way? We love this church and believe others would love it, too, if they knew about it. Teach us how to tell them.

A friend of mine tells about a transformational church conference in which everyone was made to stand and take the following pledge: "I am Presbyterian and I can change. If I have to. I guess."

That me and you, isn't ? We're Presbyterian and we can change. If we have to. We guess.

200 members by 2012? Come, Lord Jesus, and teach us to 'go fish' in your name.

To the glory of God. Amen.