

## **Catching People**

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 4:18-22

Delivered on January 26, 2020

According to the gospel of Matthew, one day, Jesus was on the shore of the Sea of Galilee when he saw Andrew and his brother Simon casting a net into the sea to catch fish. We are then told that Jesus called to these fishermen, and their response was not to debate this call, or deliberate about it, or even to say give us a few minutes. Rather, we are told that Simon and Andrew simply dropped what they were doing, they literally dropped their net and followed Jesus. Then Jesus went to James and John who were mending their nets in the boat with their father Zebedee, and the same thing happened. Again, upon hearing Jesus' call, they dropped everything and followed, even leaving their father Zebedee behind in the boat. We're not even told that they said goodbye to their father, although maybe they did, but we don't know.

I wonder, when is the last time you simply dropped whatever it was you were doing because in a single moment in time, in a single instant it was no longer important. It doesn't happen often. When I was a kid, I can vividly remember sitting in a restaurant with my brother King and our grandmother when an elderly man collapsed in the parking lot. I can still see waiters and dishwashers dropping arm loads of dishes and running outside to attend to this poor man. That's pretty normal, of course. You drop everything when someone is having a life or death emergency, or when there's a fire, or you are under attack. But why would someone drop everything in order to follow this stranger calling to them from the shore. Well, I don't think it is because Jesus had some magical power over them, or he cast some spell over them. But I think we get a clue in the words he said to Simon and Andrew. "Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

My father told me a story once about a professor of his when he was in law school. I don't remember the professor's name, nor do I remember what subject he taught. But whenever he saw you doing poorly as a student, he would say Don't worry, young man, and in those days most everyone in law school was a man, he'd say "Don't worry young man, it is not too late to work with your hands." In other words, in his sarcastic way, this professor was saying "You better find a job doing manual labor, because you're not going to make it as a lawyer." But as you can probably tell, there was also a certain amount of condescending snobbery behind this remark. It was the professor's way of saying not only are you not going to make it as a lawyer but you're going to end up doing something as dishonorable and as degrading as working with your hands. It was, in other words, a way of looking down on people who worked as farmhands, factory workers, maids, janitors, cooks. It was if to say the important professions in the world involve talking with your mouth. The unimportant ones involve working with your hands.

Well, I hope that none of us believe that. I hope that no one here believes that people who labor with their hands do work that is any less important than those who talk with their mouths. Our society wouldn't function very well without lawyers and teachers, professors, politicians, salespeople, but our society wouldn't function at all without people to grow our food, build our houses, pave our streets, and construct our bridges.

But I also think this attitude, I think this arrogant attitude toward those who labor has been around for centuries. Even thousands of years. For thousands of years, physical labor was something that slaves were supposed to do, people who weren't considered full human beings, or at a time when women were considered less than human, it was work that women were

supposed to do. Women and slaves were supposed to cook, wash clothes, harvest crops, and clean houses, while free men were supposed to read, think, discuss and lecture.

So in light of this attitude, we can imagine what it must have been like for these laboring fishermen Simon and Andrew to hear a word from Jesus about fishing for people. "Your lives, Simon and Andrew may deal with the manual labor of catching fish. Your lives may deal with the manual labor of cleaning fish, scaling fish and mending nets, but from now on you are going to be talking with your life." We can also imagine that were Jesus to have gone to a seminary and said these words to a collection of students studying for the priesthood they probably wouldn't have had the same effect. But to these people working with their hands, he said you are going to be telling people about the kingdom of God, and they are going to listen to what you have to say. Maybe you've never thought you had anything important to say before, but now you do. Maybe you've never thought you had anything to say worth listening to before, but now you do. You have the kingdom of God to tell people about, and what could be more important than that?

In his book *Becoming a Blessed Church* N. Graham Standish reports that while we might expect that an educated clergy stimulates church growth, there is actually an inverse relationship between the amount of formal education people in the clergy have and the growth of their denomination. Standish in fact, states that only 42 percent of pastors in high-growth churches have seminary training, while in low-growth churches 85 percent do. Traditional, mainline denominations like Lutherans, Methodists and Presbyterians all expect a high level of education among their pastors, usually because the denominations themselves are highly educated, but the fastest growing movements among Christians are among the Pentecostals

and non-denominationals, where you will far fewer advanced degrees among the clergy or in the pews.

Now, I am not suggesting that there is not a great value to clergy having formal education. And I think you all probably know me well enough to know that if I tried to tell you I believed that, I would lose all credibility with you. Of course there is a great value to formal education. But here's what else is true. Clergy and denominations who are well educated have a certain problem. And their problem is that they have a hard time telling other people about their faith because they take it for granted that people will listen to them. They take it for granted that their words have value, and that they have something to say in this world. We Presbyterians are used to our words having value. But if you're not used to the idea that your words have value, what a privilege it is for you to go out and fish for people. Think about that. Who are the people who can't wait to tell you about their faith? Who are the people who can't wait to stop you on the street and tell you what God has done in their lives. Nine times out of ten it isn't the educated, the proud, the sophisticated. It isn't the people who can pull their resume out of their pockets and show you all the advanced degrees they have. They're scared to death of looking like fools. It's people like these fishermen, Simon and Andrew. It's people like these fishermen James and John.

Well, so far, you may feel that this sermon is making a lot of sweeping generalizing; it is a sermon trafficking in stereotypes. Surely not every person who works with their hands believes that the world doesn't care what they have to say. And surely not every educated person believes the world *does* care what they have to say. But we have to use stereotypes or else we will have no picture, no understanding at all of who this Jesus is and what gospel he represents.

Everyone in this world is an individual and no two of us are exactly the same. But from telling fishermen from now on you will be fishing for people, we know that we are also told whenever we have felt voiceless, God will be our voice. Whenever we have been told that our words don't matter, we are now instead told that whenever we speak the truth about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we speak with the very words of the divine. And we may have felt voiceless because we lack a formal education and we work with our hands, or we may have felt voiceless because something about us makes us the victim of prejudice, or we may have felt voiceless not because of any social condition, but we were simply brought up believing we didn't have anything important to say. You may have grown up around someone who said "Children should be seen and not heard." What an awful thing to teach a child. If someone as a child grows up believing they don't have anything important to say, how in the world are they going to develop into an adult who believes they have something important to say? But now you will be fishing for people, and I hope that in the words our Lord addresses to these four fisherman, you may also hear yourself addressed.

Well, now, I am going to take you in a time machine and fast forward out of the snowy cold of January to the story we tell with the blooming daffodils and crocuses of early Spring. On the first Easter Sunday according to the gospel of Luke, we are told that when Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna and other unnamed women came out to the tomb to find the body of Jesus, they saw the stone rolled away from the tomb, and all the signs of the resurrection, and so they went and told the apostles, they went and told the men. You know the story, but what you may overlook in Luke's gospel is a phrase I love. We are told that when the women reached the men and told them all about what they saw, and heard, to them, it

seemed like an idle tale. IT SEEMED LIKE AN IDLE TALE. You are surely familiar with the phrase “an old wives tale”. When I was growing up I used to ask my parents about things my friends would tell me at school. You know these silly things you hear in school, like when someone tells you something like if you touch a frog you’ll get a wart, or if you break a mirror you’ll have seven years of bad luck. And so I’d ask my parents about that and they’d say no that’s just an old wives tale. Now people who use the phrase old wives tale are not sexist, I use the phrase, you probably do too, but it has sexist origins. What is an old wives’ tale, it is something that should be dismissed out of hand, because it comes from women who aren’t trustworthy. An old wives tale. But were it not for the old wives tales of these women, we would not know about the resurrection. If it were not for the idle tales of these women, Jesus would just be another name in the long list of martyrs who died for a failed cause. The pages of history are full of them.

That is what the gospel does. It says to people who work with their hands, from now on you will be fishing for people. It says to slaves from now on you will be fishing for people. It says to women whose words were dismissed out of hand, from now on you will be fishing for people. You who have been told that your words don’t matter, but your words are every bit as important as the words of any prophet, the words of any priest, the words of any king.