

Fishing for People

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Mark 1: 14-20

Delivered on January 21, 2018 at Northminster Presbyterian Church in North Canton, Ohio

Since I have been a minister, there have been two things which I have vowed to myself that I would never do, no matter how tempted I might feel to do them. The first thing is that I have vowed never to do is to make anyone pray anything that I know they're not going to agree with. Now, I can't help it if someone doesn't agree about the basics of the Christian gospel. If someone comes to this church from another faith and they don't agree with praying in the name of Jesus, I'm not going to stop praying in the name of Jesus. I don't mean that. But what I mean is that I try my best never to make you or anyone else pray something that I know is controversial among you. I think that when we pray we really are having a conversation with God, and I believe that when someone trusts me as their pastor to lead them in prayer to God that is a very serious matter. That is a sacred trust and I am deeply honored by that sacred trust. And so I don't like it when I go to church somewhere and some pastor stands up and says "We pray to you O God that the Supreme Court would do this" or "the Congress would do that", or "We pray to you O God that you would change the President's heart on this or that." Good grief! If that's something you want to say to God, say it in the privacy of your own home, but don't make someone else say that to God. That is a violation of that sacred trust.

And then there's the second thing I have vowed never to do. The second thing I have vowed never to do is to use a funeral as an occasion to try and make converts to Christianity, to save souls for Christ, or however you want to say it. I'm sure that some of you have had the experience of being at a funeral somewhere where some well-meaning preacher gets up and stands over a casket and says "I know that this person believed in Jesus and they're going to

heaven and all of you better accept Jesus too or you're not going to see him again." A funeral when people are gathering together with all kinds of beliefs and all kinds of faiths in a time of grief and mourning is not the time to force your faith on someone else. Now, you may say to me, "Why not Pastor Rich? If you really believe that people need saving isn't every occasion an occasion to give them the saving message of the gospel of Christ. What if they were to die tomorrow?" These are good questions. But my answer is, I trust God more than that. I trust that God is a good enough God that he is not going to allow someone's eternal salvation to depend on the kind of message they heard when they were coming to grieve over their beloved friend or family member.

According to a 2011 survey of members of the PC(USA), 42 percent of Presbyterians say that they have never once shared the gospel with anyone in their lives, or told someone else about Jesus. Some people would tell you that that must be because 42 percent of Presbyterians don't believe that faith in Christ matters that much, or that people need saving. But I don't think that's true. I seriously doubt that you would get yourself out of bed and iron your best clothes and drag yourself to church on cold mornings like these if you didn't believe that Christ matters. I think the real reason more people don't share the gospel is that they have had a negative experience with people who share their faith. They have had experiences of people who knock on your door and force their way inside your house and then want to tell you all about their faith but who aren't interested in your faith, or what you believe. If what you believe isn't what they believe, it's just wrong, end of story. In fact, not only are they not interested in what you have to say about your faith, they are not really interested in anything you have to say unless you tell them that yes, they are right and you want to convert to their

faith. But it may comfort you to know that that is not sharing the gospel. Sharing the gospel is just that. It is sharing. It is not forcing, it is not coercing, it is not lecturing, it is not manipulating, it is not intimidating, it is not lying. It is sharing.

There are people in this world who will have no reservations at all about trying to intimidate you or pressure you or manipulate you into accepting the gospel of Jesus Christ and they aren't bad people, they actually think they are doing it for your own good. They will say to themselves "The ends justify the means." If you end up accepting Jesus and going to heaven, what does it matter, what will it really matter what method was used on you to get you to do it. If you don't like their method, "Get over it!" they say. Well, you know what, I don't think that works very well. I don't agree that the ends justify the means, but even if I did, I still wouldn't think that works very well.

In the first chapter of the gospel of Mark, Jesus is walking by the Sea of Galilee when he sees Simon and his brother Andrew casting nets into the sea to catch fish as they were fishermen by trade. Because the earliest disciples were fishermen, in fact, you may be aware that the earliest symbol for the Christian faith, long before the cross was used was a fish. In fact, it is symbol that has seen a bit of a revival recently as some people you may have noticed as you travel along the highways and byways of this country have put the fish symbol on the back of their cars to signify to the world that they too are followers of Christ—to signify it in a much more tasteful and classy way, I might add than people sometimes show their Christian faith to the world. So Simon and Andrew are fishermen, and as they are casting their nets into the sea of Galilee Jesus calls to them and says "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men," or as it says in other versions "Follow me and from now on you will be catching people, or

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” I don’t think it matters so much how you translate Jesus’ words, the point of what he was saying is that from now on, these fishermen would be sharing the gospel with people. And we are told that *immediately*, immediately Simon and Andrew left their nets and followed the Lord. Now, I should point out that immediately is Mark’s favorite word. You know how some people have a favorite word that they say over and over again to the point where it no longer has any meaning. They don’t even know they’re saying it half the time. I had a friend once whose word was literally. “Literally everyone was there. It was literally the best party ever. It literally went on all night.” Literally. Well, Mark’s word is “immediately.” But when Mark says “immediately”, I think he means it. Immediately as if with no deliberation, Simon and Andrew left their nets and followed Jesus.

Now, I have heard some people, plenty of people in fact talk about this passage and say that what Jesus was saying in this passage is that sharing the gospel is no different from catching fish. Well, I would not be surprised if those who tell you that are also those who have no reservations about you manipulating, pressuring, intimidating, lying and using all kinds of means to convert people to the Christian faith. Spreading the gospel is just a matter of dangling out a piece of bait to someone else that ends up with a hook in your mouth. But I think it is pretty obvious if you pay attention to this story that Jesus was saying just the opposite. Sharing the gospel is not like catching fish. Now, I want to tell you something, but before I do, I know there may be some extremists in the animal rights movement who disagree with me about this, but I’ve got some news for everyone this morning, are you ready? People are better than fish. And as the Lord was calling out to Simon and Andrew he was saying I’ve got a better life for you. I’ve got a better offer for you. And Simon and Andrew left their nets to follow Jesus

because they knew that catching people was better than catching fish. They didn't even have to think about it. Isn't it obvious that people are better than fish? You can own a fish and watch it swim around in your fish bowl and the fish will not object to being owned. If you own a fish you are not hurting the fish any. But you are hurting a person if you own one. A fish cannot be lied to or resent being lied to, but a person certainly can. A fish cannot be emotionally hurt or emotionally damaged, but again a person certainly can. Fish cannot be humiliated by being mocked and teased and insulted, but people can. And people will only respond to the gospel when they believe they are respected by the one who shares the gospel, they are treated with dignity by the one who shares the gospel, they are cared for by the one who shares the gospel. Sharing the gospel is not a matter of casting out a net into the sea and seeing how many pieces of meat you can pull into your boat. Simon and Andrew knew they were being called to a better life than a life of being trapped in this mindless task of making a living around simple creatures. Creatures that are beautiful as all God's creatures are beautiful. But creatures among whom they didn't ever have to share their story, or share themselves and who they were and in the process learn someone else's story and who they were. And that is why when Jesus called them to such a life they didn't even bother to take their nets with them or sell them, or give them away. We are told they simply left their nets and followed Christ. I don't know what that means but I guess it means they just dropped them right there in the middle of the sea.

A while back I was at the deli to buy some meat and cheese when twenty other people were there. You know what that's like. You go up to the deli counter and you take that tag with a number on it, and you wait around with everyone else who has this impatient look on their face. The butcher calls out a number like 11, and some man comes to the counter and says "I'd

like a half a pound of swiss cheese sliced paper thin.” “Twelve!” A woman says “I’d like a pound of roast beef.” And then “Thirteen... Fourteen!” and you are getting impatient because you’re number is something like 25. And you are clutching that paper for dear life because you know if you drop it or lose it, you have to start all over again with a new number and wait for twenty more people to be called. And then when people get up there to the deli counter one by one, of course there is no time for the butcher to ask them anything about themselves, or even what their names are. Their names could Jane, or Eric or even Moon Unit or Dweezle. They could be astrophysicists or drug dealers or anything in the world. It doesn’t matter. Well, I don’t believe in a God for whom sharing the Christian faith is like a trip to the deli. I don’t believe in a God for whom sharing the faith is just a matter of adding to the numbers of those souls that are saved, or adding numbers to the church roles as if all that people are is just numbers and nothing more. That is not what sharing the gospel is about. It is about being completely honest with someone else about your own story, your own struggle with sin and doubt, about your own rejoicing at forgiveness, love and grace, about your learning to trust God whether that learning experience took days or weeks, or months or even years, and in the process inviting someone else to open up about all their own personal hopes and fears and doubts and dreams. Don’t be afraid to share the gospel, and don’t let anyone else turn sharing the gospel into something it is not. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.