

Jesus Calling – 26Jan2020
Matthew 4:12-23

At Bible study on Wednesday, the group noticed there are lots of dreams in Matthew. As if joining the party, I had a dream about today's passage, which must have been lots on my subconscious.

I dreamed I parked by one of the Madison lakes and pulled a fishing pole out of the car. It's not totally unusual that I'd have a fishing pole along. Somehow I ended up with a big spinner bait just sitting in the edge of the water and I hooked a nice little 12" bass (well, kind of a bass, though more silver in the dream).

If you fish, you know that sometimes a fish goes for the bait, then turns away from it but still gets hooked. This dream fish got hooked behind its gills. As I was going to remove it, the fish had turned into a person, with a great big hook stuck in their arm, so then I had to get the hook out of a human arm.

Though my dream envisioned it, that is not what Jesus meant when he talked about fishing for people. So if we're trying to catch his meaning, we should probably throw out the line again.

I have to say, I was a bit grumpy at this reading at first. I've been telling you the past couple weeks that the season of Epiphany is about Jesus being made known to us, showing forth who God is, revealing the true God for us.

Well, as I first read this, it didn't seem like it was revealing all that much about Jesus. Maybe the stuff from the prophet Isaiah, for Jesus living out in a rural crossroads of Galilee, pointing out that God could be found away from the centers of power, in unexpected places. But that's not a very thrilling insight.

Further, the sense of calling seemed to be more about you than Jesus. I don't think sermons should be all about you. I like sermons to be about Jesus. Don't get me wrong: there's a distinction. Sermons are both. But they should mainly be what Jesus is for you, what he's doing for you, how God is loving you and giving you life and forgiving you and sustaining you and such. If it's mainly a perspective of "here's what you need to

do" and maybe only includes Jesus "because he said so," that's not a sermon. It's a lesson. It's an instruction. If it's said energetically it might be a pep talk. But if Jesus is mainly revealed as somebody who wants you to do things, that's not very good, and he's no savior, and you don't need that news because you already have too much you think you should be doing or ways you should be different or whatever.

So if we're not looking in this reading for what you need to do if you're called by Jesus, not for an assignment you might not be living up to, and if this sense of fishing for people isn't leading toward first aid in how to remove large fishing hooks from various body parts, then we return to the question: what does this say about Jesus?

As I was looking for what calling these disciples would show about Jesus, and therefore about God, it led me to think about who fishermen were in 1st Century Palestine, out in that rural crossroads around Galilee Lake.

Our perspective is skewed by living in Wisconsin, where fishing is boats finding quiet bays to spend some leisure outdoors time (or maybe solitary guys on ice). We might get a little closer if we think about fishermen as rough around the edges, smelling like worms, with slimy fish guts, people who maybe cuss in the boat, saturated in a couple beers.

Those Galilee fishermen weren't out for the weekend getaway of recreation in nature. They weren't trying to pull up a mess of perch for a Friday fish fry. On a list of occupations ranked socially in the Roman empire, fishermen ranked last. They were captive to the economic monopoly, as all fish were claimed under ownership of the empire.

So these fishermen couldn't just catch some walleye to grill that evening. Rather, at least 40% of their catch was paid in taxes simply for the opportunity to try to catch fish (making it a really expensive fishing license). Most of the rest of the catch went to market, set to exploit the local fishers, often sold as processed salted pickled fish paste (sounds tasty, right?) to be shipped down that "road by the sea" that's mentioned in our

reading, making it maybe as far as Rome, far away from the hungry bellies that caught the fish in the first place.

It left the peasant fishermen and their families and village perhaps with the dregs of fish paste barrels, themselves as the remnant and dregs of their culture, eking out existence.

It's this kind of person Jesus calls. Jesus wants to hang out with the peasants. The exploited. The struggling-to-get-by. Those far from power. The ones who have to work night and day just to survive because they're so oppressed by the economy. This does tell us something about Jesus and about God.

More, the metaphor of fishing in the Bible can be about pulling something out from hidden places and bringing it into view, which was used about judgment and calls to justice. These folks fishing for people could be saying that God's judgment will be in the peasants pulling the wealthy aristocracy, the comfortable oppressors, the full-bellied self-satisfied upper crust out to face justice, to reckon with God.

Setting aside the summer bass boats or those out this weekend with ice augurs and tip-ups, instead thinking about the God who in Jesus calls 1st Century fishermen, we might move it forward with a few examples.

One thought I had this week was while our Confirmation class was shopping for the Lussier food pantry. It's good that we want to share, that we want to offer food to hungry bellies, that we teach that practice. But it is definitely odd and a change from Jesus' time that we would think of church as the ones donating to the food pantry more than needing to use the food pantry, the poor people, working minimum wage jobs night and day maybe even serving us our food but still not able themselves to have enough. It's not an exact parallel, but we should consider it for where Jesus is and what that means.

For observing Reconciling in Christ Sunday, I have also been thinking that the church has too often and still too much gotten this exactly wrong for LGBTQ folks. When society has been wronging and oppressing queer people, the church

has jumped on the oppressive bandwagon. But Jesus is in the same boat with those exploited and struggling, so the church could have seen Jesus calling LGBTQ fishermen who, with the biblical metaphor, would then be pulling others out to be judged for exclusions and injustices and ignoring God's blessing.

Again, for this gathering, there may be a typical sense that I as a pastor have answered God's calling and am fishing for people. But then we get to the annual meeting and the proposed budget for 2020, and I admit that my salary and benefits are the single largest piece of MCC finances. While emphasizing that pastors are not overly-compensated either for the amount of education or for the amount of hours we put in, still my wages and place in life probably don't make me exactly the category of the fishermen of Jesus who were eking out existence.

And yet, for being called by Jesus and being invited into the circle of those with whom God identifies, I also want to note this isn't limited to one socioeconomic caste or to geographic displacement or to having earned enough bruises from unmerited suffering. If Jesus is calling out to those who are struggling to get by in life, it means he is identifying with and associating with you against all that would diminish and stifle your life, those forces that make you feel trapped and confined, that cause worry or even fear, that serve to enslave you and make you feel you can never live up to the standards.

As he called to fishermen in their workplaces beside the lake, he calls to you in daily life, in all the stresses and frustrations. He goes on to "proclaim the good news and cure every disease and sickness." Jesus is out to stop what is bad. It is for those moments and in those reasons that God in Jesus comes to our world and wants to be known in your life, to pull out those hidden struggles to be judged by God as wrong, to set it right, to give you life. It is for this reason that he calls out your name.

Hymn: "You Have Come Down To the Lakeshore" (ELW 817)