

“Fisherfolks”

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur, Georgia
Season of Epiphany, Sunday, January 26, 2020
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Holy Scriptures: Matthew 4:18-23

¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. ²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Fisherfolks

A wonderful family friend,
 early in his Christian vocation
 he realized he needed to overcome the temptation
 to be a Lone Ranger.
He had to be intentional to learn the art of teamwork,
 to foster teams, do team building.
He said that his parents told him his first words were, *“Do it myself!”*

Do-It-Myself people often find themselves going it alone.
Lone Rangers don’t last.
Building and rebuilding God’s Beloved Community takes a village.

Very early in his ministry
 Jesus of Nazareth moved across Galilee,
 Teaching, preaching, healing, helping,
 yet pretty much going it alone.

Early in his ministry
 the realization dawned he needed to build a team
 to teach and reach people to carry forward God’s love.

*“As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee,
 he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother,
 casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen.
And Jesus said to them,
 “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”*

Immediately they left their nets and followed him."

We glean from the Gospel
that the divine mission of being a fisher of people
is a vocation you learn as you go along.

So true.

God calls you to follow God, you say no, or maybe later, or maybe not, end of story.
Or, you say, *"Yes, Lord, here am I. Send me."*
You then pick up whatever skills and tools necessary
through on-the-job-training.

That seems about right.

On-the-job training certainly worked for the Disciples.
Jesus called, they put down their nets and followed him on the way.
Isn't that pretty much how each of us learned how to follow our Lord?
And so many ways that's my story.
God called.

I said yes.

And ever since,

I've been learning on-the-job, in Sunday school, in seminaries, in your presence.
Growth has been gradual, subtle at times, more distinct in others.
For Andrew and Simon and the other disciples,
there may have been a time when they looked back and reflected and said,
*"You know, when we were on the beach in the sand and sun,
Jesus never said anything about Saturday board retreats,
plunging toilets, washing dishes,
or picking up the toys in the nursery."*

Fisherfolks

They say a pastor was leaving a church.
At the farewell dinner, he was interrupted by the tears of one of the pillar members,
"Please don't be so sad," said the preacher. *"Your next pastor might be better than me."*
"That's why I'm crying. That's what they said last time."

One never knows what an interruption might bring.
Listen; it just might be Jesus knocking.
If music is in the pause between the notes,
then Christian ministry is in the interruptions of the day.
Consider a day in the life of a parish minister, which is akin to any of your own.
You are running out the door of your home in route to yet another Church meeting,
and the phone rings.
On the phone is a young person looking for some courage and moral support
before she shows her mom a report card.

A deadline is drawing near, the pressure is on,
when there's a knock on the door
because someone has dropped by for a chat,
or a prayer, or a couple of dollars for gas,
or a shoulder to lean on.
Jesus Christ knocks on our doors all the time,
and has yet to make an appointment.

Fisherfolks accept as a social reality the 5% rule.

Five percent of the people you serve alongside
may not like your hair, or the color of your favorite coat,
or the way you roll your R's,
or the way you run a meeting,
or the theme you advocate for Vacation Bible School.
And there is very little, if anything, you can do about it.
Except for this: Love your neighbor, pray for them,
and get up out of bed raring to go to work and to pray and play in the everyday.
You can't fix anyone else.
You can't change anyone else.
The only one you can change is...wait for it...yourself.
And maybe by changing yourself, someone else will decide to change.

Remember, my friends, you are not defined by your clothes or wheels or house
or what anyone thinks of you. You are defined by God.

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God calls.
We follow.
We have learned much from those who went before...or we should have!
God calls us to be fishers of people, to connect our neighbors with the love of Christ.
Our responsibility is to make the connections, to connect folks with the holy.
Christ will do the claiming and cleaning.
Like Planet Fitness, be a judgment free zone.

Attitude counts as much as anything.
Whenever you preach and teach, sing and reach, write and connect with your neighbors,
90 percent of what people hear and receive
will be gleaned from how you speak and your demeanor,
and 10% from the content of the talk.
You know that love of God that resonates within?
Share it with joy and sincerity.

A deacon in a sister church volunteered to lead a children's sermon.
She had the children share how to catch fish.
Then she asked them what we need to do to catch people, like Jesus told us to do.
"Throw them in," said a child.

Fisherfolks

Part of being a fisher of people is being willing to strive toward reconciliation.
Honestly, what do you think,
 is a big part of following God
 to experience reconciliation and redemption and renewed relationships
 in your life?

Do you seek to make resurrection a daily experience, not simply an end-of-life hope?

You and I are blessed to stand on the shoulders of spiritual forebearers
 who intentionally sought to work through
 fragmented, broken, disappointing relationships
 in order to create wholeness, with the grace of God.

Practically speaking,
 most of the souls within hearing of this Word
 have ample opportunities
 to build bridges across the chasms sunk deep by disappointment.

Addressing the ones you are disappointed by
 or have lost faith in
 or been hurt by
 is never easy nor to be taken lightly or slightly or blithely.

Such an endeavor takes courage and resolve, fortitude and faith,
 and a spectacularly huge dose of grace.

The Good News is that God's grace is sufficient.

One day the Lord said to the Apostle Paul,
 "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Plowing through the rough terrain of disappointment
 in any relationship requires grace.

In God we trust, right?

So, take a risk.

Let go and let God's grace go to work and play.

Nadia Bolz-Weber said:

"God's grace is not defined as God being forgiving to us even though we sin.

*Grace is when God is a source of wholeness,
 which makes up for my failings.*

*My failings hurt me and others and even the planet,
 and God's grace to me is that my brokenness is not the final word
 ...it's that God makes beautiful things out of even my own shit [sinfulness].*

*Grace isn't about God creating humans and flawed beings
and then acting all hurt when we inevitably fail
and then stepping in like the hero to grant us grace
- like saying, "Oh, it's OK, I'll be the good guy and forgive you."*

*It's God saying,
"I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be the final word.
I am a God who makes all things new." [1]*

Being called by Christ to follow him on the way means
to become channels for the power of God to be made perfect in our weakness,
in our imperfection, in our sinfulness and senseless pride,
in our flaws and mistakes and the errors of our ways.

Rather than allowing personal disappointment
to destroy or divide or disrupt the flow of our spirits,
we can choose to allow the grace of God to strengthen our coping skills.

Eliza Stephenson said,
*"Disappointment to a noble soul is what cold water is to burning metal;
it strengthens, tempers, intensifies, but never destroys it." [2]*

Fisherfolks

On the other side, Noble Souls,
just 'round the bend from disappointment, is reconciliation.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is the tattooed and pierced and fiercely loving Lutheran pastor
of the House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver,
a church where a chocolate fountain, a blessing of the bicycles,
and serious liturgy come together.

She's a face of the Emerging Church,
redefining what church is, with deep reverence for tradition. [3]

In Krista Tippett's interview of Bolz-Weber, Tippett said,
*"One thing I really like that you name and elaborate on in your book
...is a real reality check about churches, even your church,
as a place that is going to disappoint people,
where people will get hurt,
because it's full of human beings.*

*And we know that these things happen, and they take us by surprise
and they're so devastating because it's church.*

You're very clear that this community will disappoint people.

[You write:] "It's a matter of when, not if.

We will let them down or I'll say something stupid and hurt their feelings."

Nadia Bolz-Weber replied, *“And experience has proved that this is true, yes.
...I'm completely idealistic about God's ability to redeem our stuff and our mistakes,
but I think if we aren't open about the fact that we've made them,
that can be a barrier to experiencing that forgiveness
and ...redemption and ... grace.*

*So I think in a way what might sound sort of cynical about
...don't trust us, don't be idealistic about this community or about me,
to me that just opens a door for grace in a sense.*

*Because what I say to people,
...I'm glad you love it here, but...at some point,
I will disappoint you or the church will let you down.*

*Please decide on this side of that happening
if, after it happens, you will still stick around.
Because if you leave, you will miss the way that God's grace comes in
and fills in the cracks of our brokenness.
And it's too beautiful to miss. Don't miss it.*

Speaking personally as a Christian on the eve of his 60th birthday,
and professionally as a pastor for lo these 35 years,
I resonate with Nadia Bolz-Weber faith journey
and in confessing that my congregation
“is not unfamiliar with me apologizing for being wrong.

*And [you] have forgiven me many times for mistakes that I have made.
And I'm exceedingly grateful for that.*

*Also, I will say that I think that the fact that I don't find it a threat to my authority
to say that I've made a bad call or that I've made a mistake,
I think that actually allows this population
to let me have authority
for [the congregation and in the wider community].*

*“By...pretending that we didn't [mess up]
does not in any way keep other people from knowing
that we made a huge mistake.
So, if you're somebody who just has that transparency,
people tend to just trust you more
rather than resent you for making mistakes.” [4]*

Fisherfolks, God calls us just as we are
to serve and love God and one another.
Imperfect, flawed, authentic,

we all make mistakes,
we do what we ought not to do,
we don't do what we ought to do.
And we are the very souls Christ calls to fish for folks,
to love, to reconcile, to share God's grace, which is sufficient,
God's power made perfect in our weakness.

A Christian confesses what happened the evening she has one cocktail too many.
On a whim, she decides to go ice fishing, so she gathers her gear
and goes walking around until she finds a big patch of ice.
She heads into the center of the ice and begins to cut a hole with a saw.
All of sudden, a loud booming voice comes out of the sky.
"You will find no fish under that ice."
She looks around.
Sees no one.
She saws some more.
Once more, the voice speaks.
"As I said, there are no fish under the ice."
She is now flustered and somewhat scared, so she asks the voice,
*"How do you know there are no fish?
Who do you think you are? God? Are you trying to warn me?"*
"No", the voice replied. "I am the manager of this hockey rink."

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Patrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*

[2] Eliza Tabor Stephenson

[3] "On Being" Krista Tippett, October 23, 2014, Interview of Nadia Bolz-Weber. _

"Seeing the Underside and Seeing God: Tattoos, Tradition, and Grace"

[4] "On Being" Ibid.