

“Casting Our Nets...Aside”

Mark 1:14-20

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Saint Paul, Minnesota

The Third Sunday after Epiphany / Commitment Sunday

Prayer: In the quietness of these moments, O God, teach us what we need to know and show us what we need to do, to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

In last week's Gospel reading from the first chapter of John, we heard Jesus call Phillip and Nathaniel. This week in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, Jesus extends a similar invitation to Simon and Andrew—two brothers who were fishermen. This pattern then gets repeated a short time later with another set of brothers, James and John, who also immediately cast their nets aside and follow Jesus.

We'll, last Sunday, and with a similar text about invitations being extended to follow Jesus, I talked about discipleship and what it means to take seriously the invitation to be a follower of the risen Christ in the world. Today, I'd like us to consider essentially the same question, only this time I'd like us to consider it in light of the work the Stewardship Committee of this church has been doing to create a climate of giving that not only supports the ongoing work of the church but helps us live more faithfully as followers of Jesus. This is the Sunday, after all, they selected as Commitment Sunday—a day when we will focus on giving financially to the church.

Please know at the outset, that as your pastor, I bristle at the notion of what has traditionally been known in a lot of churches as “Stewardship” Sunday. As followers of Jesus, our whole lives, including each day we live them, is about being good stewards of what we have, which includes far more than just our money. It includes our time and our gifts, our opportunities, our health and our relationships. How we live our lives and upon whose behalf, is a stewardship issue. So implying that this is the one day out of the year when we're going to focus on stewardship, and then limit it only to the stewardship of our finances, is missing something quite fundamental, it seems to me, about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. I'd like to believe that at its core, every sermon I preach is essentially about stewardship. Every sermon is about what we do with what we have.

But there are times in the life of any organization, whether in this church community or within your own family, when conversations about money need to take place. To refrain from having such honest conversations only leads to misinformation and false impressions with no opportunity to learn the truth and correct what needs to be corrected.

And believe it or not, it wasn't that difficult to consider the issue of stewardship in light of today's Lectionary Gospel text, which is not unlike last week's text in which Jesus calls two disciples. Jesus sees two brothers fishing—casting their nets into the sea, and he says to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” The text says, “And immediately, they left their nets and followed him.”

Again, it seems to be an instantaneous decision on their part requiring no time to consider the offer or to ask the advice of friends and family. Really? They didn't need any clarification? “Um...excuse me, what exactly does

fishing for people imply? What does it pay? What will I be giving up and what will I get out of it?" Those are normal questions and no one would be considered unreasonable for asking them.

But immediately, they left their nets and followed him. And in casting aside their nets, consider for a moment what they gave up. Those brothers were not fishing for fun or for sport. The nets are what those brothers used in their trade—they are what they used to make a living. And so I think the nets have a way of serving as a wonderful metaphor when it comes to us considering the question of stewardship.

Because those nets represent their livelihoods, their incomes on which they provide for themselves. And as such, the nets were used to gather fish in. They were used to collect unto themselves and ultimately into their boats, the fish they will then sell and eat and exist off of and presumably support their families. These early disciples are walking away from all of that in order to follow Jesus. They are walking away from perhaps the only thing they know, the only skill or trade they had, and are setting off in a whole new direction, uncertain of the outcome. Because if you are walking away from the only life you know and from an income that may vary depending on the haul of fish, but an income nonetheless, and are agreeing to an unknown path with no guarantee of the financial outcome, you are either crazy, or you are committed. You are either irrational, or you feel something very passionately deep inside of yourself.

What we see in the disciples' willingness to follow Jesus, is a depth of loyalty and commitment that is really quite remarkable. And isn't the question of stewardship ultimately about just that: loyalty and commitment? It's about what we do with what we have. It's about the priorities we set in our lives. It's about the self and about that which we can do without. It's about understanding in a fundamental way the very real difference between wants and needs. In short, it's about how much we gather into our nets and about how much give away out of our nets.

And so on this Sunday when I want to talk to you specifically about your finances in light of your relationship to the church, on one level, it's really not all that complicated. The church needs money. You have some. The church is asking for some of it. It's that simple and straightforward.

But on another level, there is a deeply spiritual component to your giving whether you realize it or not. It is not an accident that Jesus talked about money and our possessions more than he did anything else in recorded scripture. And if we're honest with ourselves, we know why that is—it's hardly a mystery. Jesus talked about money and possessions and about how hard it was for the wealthy—the self-sufficient, because being a follower of Jesus requires at a very basic level an acknowledgment of one's own need. It begins with the premise that we are dependent on God for what we have and that despite our hard work and best efforts and the rewards that may have come our way, all of what we have and every bit of who we are belongs to God who has entrusted us with all things.

In gratitude to God for the gifts of love and grace, forgiveness and acceptance, as well as the gifts that enrich us and equip our lives in so many ways, including with the ability to work and earn and discover meaning and purpose in what we do—it is in sheer gratitude for all of those things that we are privileged to return to God a portion of what God has given us. And it is within the community of faith, in this place that shapes us spiritually and emotionally, that we get to practice that.

We live it out in this place where the rites of passage and the milestones of life are marked as the faithful gather, as they have done down through the ages. It is in this place that we baptize our young and bury our dead. We pray for those in need and we pray for the world. Through words spoken and sung, through music and architecture and even in occasions of silence, we gather here as a family of faith sensing that we are better and stronger, more whole as God's people when we are together, for example, to bury our dead or to see our children marry. To have our fears addressed and prayed for. To weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. And to consider who it is we are being called to be as we live in today's world with all its complexity, brokenness and pain.

This church—the House of Hope, from its founding, was a place of refuge and welcome for all those on the western frontier who found themselves beleaguered and in need of hope. And in the 163 year history of this church, that mission hasn't really changed. In so many ways we are still on the frontier, following the risen Christ in a new and ever-changing world. And in most everything we strive to do and be as a church, we continue to be a place of refuge for the weary, a source of inspiration for those in need of hope, and a continuing presence of Christ's light in our city and in the world.

I said earlier that the church needs money, and it does. It takes a lot of money to keep the doors open and the heat and lights on, as well as to carry out all we do in mission and outreach. And the church is very dependent on your monetary gifts to help it faithfully carry out its mission in the world. But I want to say something else you've perhaps heard me say before. As badly as the church needs money, we don't need it as much as you need to give it. There is a need inside each of us to give a portion of what we have and to give at a level where we can say we've felt it—that it has made some difference to us—that it's been sacrificial in some way. And so the need for us to give, in many ways, is more important than the church's need to receive. And because this church is doing so many good and worthwhile things, faithful things, I am not ashamed to stand up here and ask you to be as generous as you can possibly be in giving to the church.

And as a pastor, I can also tell you this from personal experience. I have been fortunate to encounter along the way, people of good faith who have given very generously to the church and who have then confided in me that their gift represented the single largest gift they'd ever given, and that they felt so good about it. And I have never met anyone who has told me that they only gave a small token of what they are capable of giving, and that they feel good about that. It has never worked that way. But it does work the other way when giving is done generously and out of gratitude to the one who has given us more than we could ever want or imagine.

The Christian life is about discipleship, which is essentially about stewardship. It's about what kind of people we're going to be. It's about what we do with what we have. It's about casting our nets *not* out, in order to gather in more, but is perhaps about letting go of them altogether? Of casting our nets aside and letting go of the tendency to bind up and cling to that which we have and to instead, let it go. To give it away and live in faith, trusting in what God has in store for us rather than in what we can provide for and do for ourselves.

If we did that, we might be surprised at what could happen.

Amen.