

“Gone Fishing”

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Matthew 4: 12-23

It has been a long, long time since I went fishing. Growing up in Oregon fishing was part of the culture. Many of us carried our fishing gear in the trunk of our car so that if an opportunity presented itself we could stop and enjoy a few hours of solitude.

There is a story about a farmer who always seemed to catch the biggest fish. No person could find out where his secret fishing place was or what lures and techniques he used in his fishing. So one day the local game warden decided to follow the old farmer to see what he did and where he went. The farmer walked some distance to a small pond. The warden expected that there would be at least a nice lake and a nice boat. Instead there was a beat up skiff. The warden approached the farmer and asked him if he could accompany him. The farmer agreed. So the farmer rowed the two of them to the center of the pond. Then the farmer lit a stick of dynamite and threw it into the water. He

reached down and picked up the biggest fish that surfaced. The game warden was furious. Confronting the farmer the warden yelled that it was illegal to fish that way and he had a mind to arrest the farmer right then and there. Without missing a beat the farmer lit another stick of dynamite and handed it to the warden saying, "Warden that is all well and good but are you going to sit here all day and talk or are you going to fish!"

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In Matthew we have a good fishing story. The background of the story is that John the Baptist had been arrested. This was a shocking turn of events for those who envisioned creating some change within the stagnant religious system. Jesus responded by taking some time to pray and reflect about this development. When Jesus returned, he took up the message of John the Baptist, "repent for the kingdom of heaven has come."

One day as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee he saw the brothers Simon and Andrew fishing. According to

Matthew Jesus invited them to follow him and promised that he would make them “fishers for people.” Immediately, we are told, they dropped their nets and followed him. Later, Jesus saw two other brothers, James and John, sons of Zebedee off in a boat with their father fishing. Immediately they left the boat, their father, and their lives and followed Jesus.

This is a curious story about the call of the disciples. According to the way the story is presented the disciples left their professions, their family, and their villages to follow after Jesus. The call of Jesus was more powerful than jobs, family, or village.

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I have often transposed my culture and understandings into various texts. It is natural and common but can lead us to misread a text. In the past I have tended to focus on the fact that these persons left their professions---their

businesses to follow Jesus. My assumptions were that these families were engaged in the family business of fishing. I knew fishing families in the Northwest. Every day they would launch their boats into the Pacific and in the evening return with their catch. I assumed that Peter, John, Andrew and James were like those Oregon persons. Yet, when I read an article published in the *Biblical Theological Bulletin* in 1997 by K. C. Hanson,¹ I learned that I was very incorrect.

Hanson does an excellent job of detailing the economy of First Century Israel. Fishing was not a business in our sense of the term. There was no free market system in place. Rather the economy of that time was embedded in politics and kinship. At the top of this pyramid were the Roman Emperor and a small number of elites whose wealth was beyond imagination. Underneath was a system of patronage and control with tribute, leases, and taxes making sure that those who produced the products were kept at a peasant level of life style. So in that regard when Simon, Andrew,

¹ Hanson, K.C. "The Galilean Fishing Economy and the Jesus Tradition", originally published in *Biblical Theological Bulletin*, No. 27, 1997, pp. 99-111. Found at www.kchanson.com.

James and John left their “business” to follow Jesus they were not leaving much.

The other mistake I have tended to make is to disregard the image of Zebedee sitting in the boat. Whereas business might not have been as important in that day as it is in our time what was most important in that time was family and village. In an age when so many of us have left our home towns it is no a big deal to leave home. I left home after college. From that time to the present my contact with family was through phone call, letter, later email, and occasional visits. I have not been back to my hometown for decades.

In the First Century family and then village was extremely important. One’s first loyalty, even before nation, was to the family and then to the village. Villages were often a collection of families that dated back generations. When we do not understand this we do not understand the impact and scandal when these men left their families to follow Jesus. They were violating generations of tradition where honor was most important.

So in this regard when Jesus called these persons away from their family and village it was scandalous and radical. Zebedee represents what was stable. He remained in the boat, fulfilled his duty to family and village. John, Simon, Andrew, and James walked away from family and village to follow Jesus.

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I don't know if we can ever appreciate the radical nature of this text. Following Jesus costs most of us little.

I have shared the story of when a non-church family wanted me to intervene and prevent their daughter from joining a Christian communal group. Their daughter had attended our youth group over the objection of her parents. She became involved with what was called at the time the "Jesus Movement" that had a major center in Seattle, Washington. Then after graduating from high school she announced that she was joining a Christian communal group and would be dedicating her life to the gospel. Her parents

were horrified. The group she was joining forbid contact with family for six months, required the candidate to live within the commune and study and pray daily. I was contacted as the Youth Minister to intervene and prevent her from joining what some called a Christian “cult”.

Indeed I felt torn. I knew what my “expected” role was and in fact warned her about the pitfalls of this unknown group. I knew what her parents wanted me to do. I knew what the culture of organized church wanted me to do. Yet, I couldn’t help remembering texts like this one in Matthew. Did the families of the young disciples (and the disciples were young many under twenty) ---did those families view Jesus as a cult? Did those families go to the rabbis and want the priests and rabbis of the faith to talk Simon, Andrew, John, and James out of their decision? Did they side with poor old Zebedee or the young rebels who followed Jesus? Have we become the Pharisees in the story?

One example is how we have remolded the idea of evangelism. This text has been viewed as the marching

orders of modern evangelism. Especially in the American religious experience where denominations have multiplied exponentially, evangelism has come to be interpreted as church institutional growth. To hear us talk it is as though at the end of the age the folks with the most in their camp win the prize.

Just like when I transposed my understanding of free business into this Matthew text, so we transpose our cultural values of growth, success, and winning into the text in regard to evangelism. Underneath all our rhetoric is the presumptions that we are in competition with other Christian groups, other religions, and that we need to be growing in numbers and we need to have “successful and healthy congregations”. Evangelism, I have said as have others then becomes about luring, casting, and reeling in people into our boat. We have viewed it that way for so long and we all speak the same language that it is hard to see that this may not be what is meant in the Matthew text or even later in the Great Commission of Jesus that Matthew will share.

Jesus was about connecting people to God. He was not about starting a new religious movement. The word “salvation” means to heal. Salvation is a process of spiritual healing not getting our pass to enter heaven. It is about learning how to live as a child of God.

Evangelism means to share the “good news”. That good news is that God loves us and welcomes us and requires only faith. The goal of religion is to be connected to God and then to live out our lives as children of God. Each time we add a condition to that relationship or see ourselves as competing with others, we degrade that “good news”.

For Simon, Andrew, John and James under the economic thumb of Rome and the multitude of religious rules and regulations the idea that God freely loves us and accepts us “just as we are” was a breath of fresh and invigorating air. It was so “good” that they left everything to share that message with others.

In the closing chapter of Matthew Jesus gives what we call the “Great” Commission. Many read this text as a call to

go into the world and “convert” persons to the faith. But the text actually reads, “go and disciple people in the way of Jesus”. To “disciple” is a verb not a noun. It is to live with, and to live out the love that we discover through Christ. When we are living as a disciple of Jesus people will notice. Then the invitation we make has real meaning because people will see Christ within us. That is the greatest witness we can make.

Jesus continues to call us out of our bondage, our structures, and our blind spots into the graceful light of God. The good news that drew those early disciples to follow Jesus was the news God loves and accepts us just as we are. That is something worth celebrating. And that is something worth sharing.