

Mark 1:14-20
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 21, 2024

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, our Gospel reading, in which Jesus tells those whom He chooses, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last week, we heard Jesus begin to call sinners to be followers; this morning, we hear Jesus begin to call for certain followers to be sent out as fishers of men. This is a very different call, isn't it? While *both* calls are intimately attached to Jesus' preaching – “repent and believe the gospel”... and, while the latter call can only be made to those first of the former call... yet, *this* call is not for Jesus' hearers' salvation, but for *their* hearers' salvation: “I will make you fishers of **men**”... it's for the men's salvation, for the salvation of those who are far off, not for the salvation of those followers Jesus has already called near and is now calling to be fishers.

Such is not to distinguish between Jesus' preaching and his sent ones' preaching. The two are indistinguishable, for – if He sends them, they come not with their own wisdom, their own authority, or even their own words, but they come as bondservants to His wisdom, His authority, His Word: “When I came to you,” (Paul reminds the Corinthians), “I came not with

lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Or, as Jesus says it more simply to his sent ones, “He who hears you, hears Me.”

So then, when the servants of Christ preach, “repent and believe the gospel,” do we not hear *Christ himself* say, as in our text, “repent and believe the gospel”? Yes, the gospel is to be shared by preaching (as you may read in *today’s* Calvary-at-Daily-Prayer reading in Romans): “How can they believe on Him in whom they have not heard? And how can they hear unless someone preaches to them? And how can *they* preach unless they are sent?” Sent to proclaim the Gospel, to give the Gospel, from Christ to the sinners, the lost, He seeks. Thus, “fishers of *men*.”

Now, in a way, such preaching should not surprise us, for it is not unique to the Christian faith, and its commonality among the religions of the world hints that man knows he needs to hear of a gospel and a Truth outside of himself.

In other words: instinctively, man knows he needs to be preached to, that this is intrinsically part of God’s plan to communicate to the sinner He has reconciled unto himself. Yes, there is preaching in every religion: in Islam, Judaism, Mormonism. In Eastern spiritualism, man’s meditation is really just him preaching to himself. And, among the secularists, they latch on to and hope in the preaching of media figures and

Hollywood activists and politicians. In fact, as I just shared in yesterday's "Christianity and Current Events" discussion, so-called Atheist Churches are now popping up in America, complete with the singing of songs and silent prayer to nobody, ritual customs, and preaching... preaching about a gospel they believe will come from the world around them... just one example was a recent talk on current advances in space exploration. Why preach repentance over sins and forgiveness of sins when you can just hope in starting over on a new planet?

Yes, all men know they need a gospel, and – if it's a weighty gospel, a truth greater than them, from outside of them, they need it to be preached to them... that's not unique in the Church. But, it's the **content** of the preaching that matters. Whose Word are they hearing? Their own? Man's secular philosophy? Motivational speaking? The gospel of submission according to Allah or the preaching of those who believe the Messiah hasn't yet come? No, the only true preaching belongs to Christ. Christ, who calls fishers of men to begin in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth... preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations... just as Jesus himself came preaching, "Repent and believe the gospel." Notice, *the* gospel. The only gospel. Not merely a gospel, one religion's *idea* of good news; but preaching the Truth. Christ's report of the Father's reconciliation with

sinner through the work of Christ and His cross. There's the Truth of your salvation, the salvation of all mankind, that – if it is not preached, how are you to hear? How are you to have any hope? How are you to have faith – not merely in Christ's existence – but in Christ's promises?

The Augsburg Confession says it this way regarding God's all-important design of sending fishers of men:

“So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted.” [Instituted by whom? Not by the fishers themselves, but by the One who sends them with His Word and Spirit. The Augsburg Confession continues:] “Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given. He works faith, when and where it pleases God, *in those who hear the good news....*” [How will they hear unless someone preaches to them?]

Therefore, it is undeniable and unmistakable that God has always sent His Word through preaching. Whether it be Moses to Pharaoh, Jonah to Ninevah, or the fishers of men to the nations. You simply must not underestimate the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments as *the* exclusive means by which the merit of Christ crucified gives life to those dead in trespasses and sins.

In our day, the devil works to lessen our focus on the centrality of the preaching office. Do we not now hear that the church is *full of various* ministries, just *one* of them being ‘Word and Sacrament ministry’? Some congregations boast of Mercy Work ministries; Food pantry ministries; Helping Hands ministries; even Comfort Dog ministries. To be sure, the word ‘ministry’ can be used more generically to speak of how Christians serve each other, but therein is the devil’s sly trick! He seeks to redefine “ministry” to simply be how *we serve each other* rather than how ***God serves His people.***

Lutheran theologian Herman Sasse noted that the Church in America is always focused on what the church is doing rather than what the Church is receiving. And the more the church is doing, and the more ‘ministries’ it creates, supposedly the more the kingdom of God advances. No, for all the Church does in Christian love, there is only one ministry... one designed Holy Ministry of God that gives divine life to the Church; indeed, there is truly only one ministry from God to His people, by which the gospel is bestowed by God upon you, your children, and all who are far off:

“So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted.” Or, as

Jesus makes fishers of men, they go preaching “repent and believe the gospel.”

The whole life of the Church is found there: Word and Sacrament. God’s preaching, God’s gifts to His people. To bring to you the Truth... and, with it, forgiveness, life (both eternal *and daily*, for the daily life is only rightly defined when seen through the lens of God at work)... forgiveness, life, and salvation. For this purpose, Christ calls some of His followers to be fishers of men.

That brings us back to our text, for we ought consider *why* our text spends time describing what the men were doing when Jesus called them to be fishers of men. Why would the Holy Spirit inspire St Mark to record that some fishers were casting nets; others were mending nets. Why record that? Is it merely to add to the description of the moment in history? Perhaps. Or, ought we consider that the work of “fishers of men”, as Jesus uses the phrase, is going to be recognized and defined in part by the normal work of “fishers.”

Thus, we first hear that the fishers are casting their nets. The word in the Greek is ἀμφιβαλλω – (only use). You can hear the same prefix as “amphibian.” In other words, they cast their nets to bring out of water onto the stable footing of creation... that’s what an amphibian is, what fishermen do to fish. But then, what of fishers of men? Do they not ἀμφιβαλλω men? – do they

not catch men and bring them through the water into the stability of Christ's new creation. That's holy baptism, isn't it? When you were baptized, God's Holy Ministry took hold of you, brought you through the waters, and onto the stable footing of the new creation. What is death for fish is new life for man... you, brought through water, a new life defined on the firm footing of the new creation.

But we also hear in our text that some of the would-be fishers of men were mending their nets. How does that help us understand the Office of the Holy Ministry. The Greek work for mending means to repair, to equip, to make one what he ought to be. If that's what fishermen do to nets, what of fishers who tend not to nets but to men? Consider the work they are called to do through this word 'mending,' which has multiple meanings:

- Repairing you - St Paul tells the Corinthians he desires to *supply, (repair)* what is lacking in their faith.
- Equipping you – equipping you with the Truth. St Paul writes to the Ephesians that the Office of the Holy Ministry is to *equip* the saints. Likewise, the letter to the Hebrews ends, “Now may God... *equip* you with everything good that you may do His will.”
- Like mending nets, mending men can also mean “ making you what you ought to be.” Consider *that* regarding God's ministry

of His Church. St Paul says that Christ gave the apostles and prophets and pastors to build up the body of Christ into what? - “mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”... to build you up in the baptismal life, for daily life, unto eternal life... not just as individuals, but in life together as the Church of Christ.

Now, if this work – casting for and bringing men through water into the new creation, mending the men who have been caught – if that is the work described , then don’t we look at the sinner charged with all this and grow skeptical:

“This is a tall order, Pastor. What makes you qualified to have such an impact on my daily life? Why should I trust you when I see false prophets like Joel Osteen and Rick Warren dragging people along and leaving them in despair for the people’s ruin and the false prophet’s gain? Why should I believe that you have the charge to repair equip and make me what God intends me to be?”

Answer: the Word. The Word of God. The Word of Truth. The pure and unadulterated Word of Christ that called the one to be fisher of men, the Word and the Sacraments that Word

empowers with the same power by which it once called even the Ninevites to repent and believe the gospel.

Jesus does not send the fishers of men with their own toolbox and their own skillsets. He sends them precisely by putting them into that Office of the Holy Ministry that is guaranteed to work, guaranteed to cast and catch, to mend and equip into mature manhood – it's sure to work because it is the Office that knows only one ministry, one authority – the Holy Spirit at work through Word and Sacrament. Apart from these divine gifts, there is nothing but self-help or imperfect love, which all lead to despair and death. But, with these divine gifts, stewarded by bondservants of Christ, the Church knows joy in God's grace, love that patiently appeals to repentance and forgiveness, and a life everlasting.

As our epistle reading says, The appointed time has grown very short... and the present form of this world is passing away. Passing away into death, destruction, and dust. Thanks be to God that we have been ἀμφιβαλλω-ed out of it, we've been brought through baptismal waters of the world passing away, that our lives may be mended and equipped with the good news of the Gospel of Christ Jesus, and we may rejoice in being the beneficiaries of Jesus' great plan to send forth fishers of men.

And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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