

January 22, 2017 Matthew 4:12-23 Isaiah 9:1-7 Micah 6:6-8 “Called to Share the Light”

Well, we have a new United States President, and it seems as though our country is as divided as ever. President Trump defines his own mission as to “Make America Great Again.” He will need to deal with the economics of health care, military, infrastructure, international relations, but even more, the tendency most folks in our nation seem to have: that of seeing the other side as “the enemy.” Democrats, Republicans, feminists, Black Lives Matter folks, conservatives, liberals... It’s too easy, in the middle of all the news reports and goings on, to lose the underlying sense that we are all incredibly blessed to be “Americans.”

So, Americans, we are called by our identity to come together and to work together to make progress in making it possible for every person in this nation to have a just and possible life. That’s our calling as Americans who hold to the Declaration of Independence, guaranteeing each person the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Similarly, we who are Christian have a calling, and that is to share the hope and light of God’s love as made clear in Jesus Christ with everybody on our paths, whether we agree with them or not.

After his cousin, John the Baptist, was imprisoned, Jesus seemed to gain urgency about his own mission, so he started going around calling people to repent of their sins and turn to God. The Common English Bible translation reads: “From that time Jesus began to announce, ‘Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!’” He also immediately recruited people to help him with his mission, inviting twelve men to follow him and become “fishers of men/people.” Ordinary fishermen were invited to brand new kind of work, inviting people to recognize and become part of the kingdom of God here on earth.

Ordinary people are the folks Jesus to chose as his partners in ministry from the very beginning! People like us, people who would misunderstand, turn away from Jesus to save their own skins, people who became ambitious for themselves and jealous of each other... Like us. Like a church.

Through his teaching and his touching of persons, Jesus defined God’s kingdom: Where the world says you must impress other people and work hard to try to impress God, where according to our world you have to be “the best” and “the smartest” and “the richest,” in God’s kingdom those who are humble and know themselves as sinners, those who have been stepped on by others and rejected because of the judgments of religious authorities who look down on them as unclean are the ones who will find themselves invited to share in the mercy and healing and fullness of God’s kingdom.

So here we are in 2017, a time when mainline churches are generally seeing a sharp decline in membership and attendance, and a time when our younger generations seem to have pretty well decided that there are better things to do with their time than go to church. Church, one thirty-something told me, doesn’t really seem to have much to say to folks dealing with real-life

situations.

Jesus did. So why have we become unable to speak words that “fish” for people to join our journey as those who are trying to follow Jesus Christ?

Retired UMC Bishop William Willimon made some comments about this that may challenge us to become more active “fisher-folk.” Willimon wrote:

Have you reeled anyone in lately? I think it still holds true that when people are asked why they aren't active in a church, the reason given is “No one invited me.” ...They don't say, “I would come to church, but I have some real misgivings about a couple of statements in the Apostles' Creed.” ...Just the ordinary phrase, “Nobody invited me.”

When was the last time you went fishing with Jesus? Some of you might say, “In this country, religion is a private matter. Personal.”

Sorry: Jesus makes faith public, a matter of public invitation and public response. Christianity is not exclusively private or personal. Here is Jesus, walking along a road, calling on people at work, going to where they are, intruding, calling them to come be part of his movement. Nowhere does Jesus say, “I want you to sit quietly and think about me.” Rather, he says, “FOLLOW me.” He doesn't ask people to seek him out; he seeks them.

Or, you may say, “I don't want to be pushy or force my faith on anybody else.” ... Yet Jesus in today's Gospel commissions us to invite people to follow him, “Come with me and see.”

*It's so easy to slip out of the fishing business, to simply bed down here with our own members, to keep house, to evaluate the church exclusively on how church looks from the inside, rather than how it looks from the outside. It's easy to become confused into thinking that we live in a basically Christian country where being Christian is synonymous with being American. No, that comfortable arrangement is over, if it was ever true. People are not born Christian. They must be invited, lured, persuaded, caught, reeled in by people who love Jesus enough to love those whom he loves. (William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, vol. 45, # 1, p. 13)*

A visitor went to a church. The first door he tried was locked, so he went around the building, only to find that the next two doors were also closed tightly. Finally, the fourth door opened and let him in, but he was in a big room and had no idea where the church office was. So he walked around until finally he saw a small sign telling him that the office was down a flight of stairs. He went around and finally found the office. He never did see the sanctuary. He decided that the congregation must not be interested in new people becoming part of it, since it was so hard to find anything. So even if a person decides to TRY a church, will the doors be open? Will the locations of things like bathroom, office, and places to park be clear? If not, who cares how welcome that person feels?

We are called to share Light with those who too often find their lives and this world heavy with

darkness and a lack of welcome. Going to a new church can be scary. The steps are steep, the uncertainties can keep a person out. We need to invite folks to come and give it a try.

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, *Home By Another Way*, declares Jesus' calling of the four on the beach a miracle of God. First, she would have us realize how unorthodox Jesus' methods were. Listen: "It was not the way things were done in those days. Rabbis did not seek out students; students sought them. Teachers waited for people to come to them and then interviewed them carefully to decide whether or not to take them on as disciples. Only the most promising students were allowed to stay on, the ones who showed a real aptitude for theology. No self-respecting rabbi would ever have gone out to recruit his own followers, and if he had, he would not have picked the first four people he laid eyes on. By doing just that, Jesus set himself apart from the other teachers of his time. He alone walked out among the ordinary working people and chose them, without a single question, to be his friends."

"But that is not the strangest thing. The strangest thing is that they went along with him. Chances are they would not have described themselves as religious types, but they took one look at Jesus and that was that. No angst, no torn hearts, no backward glances. They just dropped what was in their hands and went after him, without saying a single word."

"...This is not a hero story but a miracle story, as full of God's power as the feeding of the five thousand or the raising of the dead... This is no story about the power of human beings to change their lives, to leave everything behind and follow. This is a story about the power of God – to walk right up to a quartet of fishermen and work a miracle, creating faith where there was no faith, creating disciples where there were none just a moment before. ... This is not a story about us. This is a story about God, and about God's ability not only to call us, but also to create us as people who are able to follow..." (*Home By Another Way*)

Several years ago a Disciples Bible Study guide that was dealing with the Ten Commandments offered a profound insight into God's "I am a jealous God. Have no other gods before me." Listen: "God wants love and respect to be shown by human children, *not for God's sake*, but for ours. God knows that human happiness depends on our putting first things first, getting out of our self-centeredness, and responding in love to our eternal and caring Creator." (P. 100, *Into the Word, Into the World*, Disciple) For OUR sake, God gives us rules. For OUR sake, God invites us to be part of God's Light coming into the world...

I close with an illustration of God's light being shared. In the mid-1800's, a man named Edward Kimball was concerned about one of his young Sunday School students who worked at a shoe store in town. One day Kimball visited him at the store, found the student in the back stocking shoes, and led him to Christ then and there. Dwight L. Moody eventually left the shoe store to become one of the greatest preachers and evangelists of all time.

Moody, whose international speaking took him to the British Isles, preached in a little chapel pastored by a young man with the imposing name of Frederic Brotherton Meyer. In his sermon Moody told an emotionally charged story about a Sunday school teacher he had known in

Chicago who personally went to every student in his class and led every one of them to Christ.

That message changed Pastor Meyer's entire ministry, inspiring him to become an evangelist like Moody. Over the years Meyer came to America several times to preach. Once in Northfield, Massachusetts, a confused young preacher sitting in the back row heard Meyer say, "If you are not willing to give up everything for Christ, are you willing to be made willing?" That remark led J. Wilbur Chapman to respond to the call of God on his life.

Chapman went on to become one of the most effective evangelists of his time. A volunteer by the name of Billy Sunday helped set up his crusades and learned how to preach by watching Chapman. Sunday eventually took over Chapman's ministry, becoming one of the most dynamic evangelists of the 20th century. In the great arenas of the nation, Billy Sunday's preaching turned thousands of people to Christ.

Inspired by a 1924 Billy Sunday crusade in Charlotte, North Carolina, a committee of Christians there dedicated themselves to reaching that city for Christ. The committee invited the evangelist Mordecai Ham to hold a series of evangelistic meetings in 1932. A lanky 16-year-old sat in the huge crowd one evening, spellbound by the message of the white-haired preacher, who seemed to be shouting and waving his lone finger right at him. Night after night the teenager attended and finally went forward to give his life to Christ. The teenager's name? Billy Graham, who has communicated the gospel of Jesus Christ to millions over the years. (from *Still More Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks*, Wayne Rice, p. 37)

We never know what God has in mind or how God will use us. Whoever we are, however young or old we are, whatever gifts we have or wish we had, we are essential to God's work. Perhaps we are willing; perhaps we are willing to be *made* willing.

May each of us experience the Light of Jesus Christ in our lives and hear in our hearts his call to us. And then, as God works Good News into our hearts, may we proclaim it to others... Remember: This is not about what human beings can do, it is about discovering what God *is doing* in our very midst. The time is now. The Kingdom of God is here. The Light has come. May we be led to recognize and share it! Amen