

Matthew 4:12-23 Bill Uetrict 1.19.23 3 Epiphany

I am sure that many of you have seen on the bumpers of many cars stickers that read, "I'd rather be fishing." Now truthfully, it's not fishing I'd rather be doing; I'd rather cycle. But I understand the appeal of fishing. I used to do it a lot when I was a kid at Paul's Lake, where I could catch bluegills, sunfish, and my least favorite, catfish. There was something about fishing that was relaxing and calming. It was almost meditative. Many people find fishing to be somewhat of a Zen experience, unless, of course, you fish for a living.

And that was the case for Peter, Andrew, James, and John. They didn't fish because they wanted to get away from it all. They didn't fish because they wanted to lose themselves in nature. They fished because that was how they brought home the bacon. They fished because fishing was the family business. And for them, fishing was hard work. Nets were heavy; the weather could be cruel; the fish were unpredictable. And on top of all of that, they had to deal with the Romans, the nasty Romans. The Romans controlled the waterways and the fishing rites. They made money off the boats they rented. They taxed just about every aspect of the process. The work of the fishermen often didn't benefit the fishermen so much as it did the Roman big wigs like Herod Antipas. He was the beneficiary of all their work. To fish for a living was to participate in a horribly oppressive industry. It was, as Sarah Dylan says, "no day at the beach."

So, I don't know, what do you think? Could this have explained why Peter and all the others were so willing to leave behind their fishing job? Anything was better than having to deal with an oppressive power like the Romans. And besides, Jesus must have been a much better boss than Herod.

There's no doubt that following Jesus is tough stuff. When James and John left their boat and their father, they were leaving behind that

which brought them security, that which oriented their lives, that which helped them pay their bills and provide for their families. They were letting go of all they knew, of that which gave them a place in the world and a sense of honor among others. When Jesus said, “Follow me,” and they followed, life would never be the same again, life would be much riskier, more unpredictable, probably harder. Discipleship of Jesus is no easy business.

Yet, think about it. Think about who is leading this movement. Think about who your new boss is. It is not Herod. It is Jesus, although “boss” is probably not the right word to describe Jesus. In his movement, life doesn’t seem to be about hierarchies. In fact, he is known for saying in his world the last are first and the first are last. In his movement hierarchies seem to be eliminated. Everybody is in everything together.

Oh, it’s not that there isn’t leadership in this movement. That sounds somewhat appealing to many of us. Quite a few of us Americans are known for saying that we want to be our own bosses, and I, as a somewhat independent sort, get that. Yet the Jesus movement is not leaderless. To follow him is in some ways to submit to him, but we are not submitting to a force that keeps us in bondage, that makes us pawns in someone else’s oppressive economy. We are not submitting to Herod. Rather, we’re submitting to that which takes us to the land of freedom; we’re submitting to a love that actually sets us free. But yes, we must admit, that love, this Jesus who sets free, turns the world as we know it upside down.

That is precisely what Paul is saying today in First Corinthians when he says, “The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.” For Paul, the message of the cross is part and parcel of what the life of Jesus and the whole Jesus movement are about. And Paul says,

to the world, that is, to most folks, the cross looks like foolishness; the cross looks like failure, the very opposite of what we want life to be about.

But Paul claims, for those who get it, the cross is a new kind of power, a new kind of freedom. The cross creates its own economy, a different way of organizing life. When the cross is at the center, life isn't about perfection, achievement, accomplishment, climbing someone's ladder. When the cross is at the center, life is not about avoiding other people's pain, lying about your real life, hiding the truth about yourself, or avoiding any kind of vulnerability.

No, in the economy of Jesus, weakness can indeed be strength, vulnerability can be a means for connecting to others, failure can be a way for us to get us in touch with our true humanity. When the cross is at the center, and here is Paul's real point today, unity is what we experience. When perfection, getting everything right, achievement, success, money, popularity are at the center, disunity is guaranteed. But when we are all brought to our common humanity, when we all are knocked off our high horses, when we all see, as Luther said, we are beggars at the cross, we are knitted together into one human family.

So, this is what we get when we follow Jesus. This is what comes to light when we respond to his call, "Follow me." We are brought into a whole new economy, a whole new way of operating, a whole new way of thinking, a whole new way of acting. What shapes life in the Jesus' movement is the cross, suffering love, compassionate love that isn't about winning or justifying yourself at the expense of other people. No, it's about that which binds us together, that which unifies us, that which takes us out of our little tribes that often are the sources for our division and weaves us into one common family.

So obviously, this following Jesus, this Jesus economy is ultimately about people. It's not about profit. It's not about scorekeeping. It's not

about success. It's about hearing the world's cries. It's about sharing in the pain and joy of others. It's about responding to the deep longings of human hearts. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." To be a part of this movement is to be driven by a concern for people.

I think many Christians when they heard or hear the call to fish for people had or have an image of a big fishing line with a hook on the end of it that they are to use to bring people into the boats that the fishermen and women own. The Christian's task is to get people one way or another, even if they would rather stay in the water, into the Jesus boat. A disciple's task is to catch souls for Jesus. Now admittedly, this isn't often a Lutheran problem. We're pretty shy when it comes to sharing Jesus with other folks. And perhaps that is because of the way that others approach this evangelism task.

The task is not to hook people by the mouth to get them into the church one way or another. Remember what is at the center of the Jesus movement is the cross, and when that is at the center, coercion or browbeating are never our tactics. The task is not to coerce. The task is to invite. The task is to listen. The task is to share in pain. The task is to say what Jesus said last week in John: "Come and see." Come and experience what we experience. Come and confront a whole new economy. Come and encounter an economy where hierarchies are gone and where freedom is experienced. Come and leave behind oppressive economies that many of you and us live in. Come and experience freedom, grace, love, forgiveness.

There's a letting go that must happen when you follow Jesus, no doubt. There's a lot that you will have to leave behind when you connect to the Jesus movement. But what you receive from it is life changing, world altering, community shaping. The economy of Jesus is a world of great freedom. When you come down to it, it's actually a world of great fun. So, I think I'd rather be fishing . . . with Jesus.