

The Second Sunday after Epiphany
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Texts referenced: Isaiah 49:1-7, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, John 1:29-42, Psalm 40:1-12

One of the reasons I love the Gospel of the Christian faith is that it is so often gritty and as embodied as real people. Not only is the story of Christ the story of God made as relevant as the human Jesus, but the stories of the Gospel are visceral and almost mundane. Jesus' birth occurs in Bethlehem as a result of everyday bureaucracy. Jesus meets with the poor, the sick, the tax collector and the sex worker, and tells parables of the farmer and the shepherd. Yet I am particularly fond of the call stories of Jesus and especially so of Simon Peter and Andrew, two fishermen in the Sea of Galilee.

They're such great examples of Jesus calling forth the leaders of the church from the everyday folk of the time, not the roman lords or centurions but instead these two men. Fishing was a huge industry for the area around the Sea of Galilee and there were many fishermen, a hard job that didn't necessarily pay the best. It makes me think that were they called today we might see Simon and Andrew called from an Amazon warehouse or McDonald's cashier counter.

Of course... you may have noticed that we don't hear about Simon and Andrew as fishermen in today's Gospel. The call story I've been talking about is from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In our Gospel from John, there is nary a fish to be found.

Instead, we're told of the faithful, pious Simon and Andrew who were already followers of John, who are not as much called by Jesus but who are rather eagerly fawn after Jesus to join him. John's account is one where Jesus' followers are not so seemingly abased as mere fishermen. Instead, they have the faithful pedigree of being John's disciples.

I fear my own assumptions of this reading come to bear, as John's account springs to mind those people and those times I have leaned towards piety over people as it seems Simon and Andrew are remembered not as fishers who became fishers of men but are rather the giants of faith that magnificent icons and images throughout history depict. That notion of strong faith I see in our Gospel conjures for me the churches and theologies that shame people and threaten people into believing a doctrine that says that as long as you have enough faith you'll be just fine and that if you don't, God still loves you, but He thinks you're doing a bad job. I wonder if you have met such voices. Where someone from the church said that you should feel guilty, or were wrong, or were sinful because of something integral to your life, or because of a question or struggle you had. I think the faithful voices have told couples in abusive relationships that they should stay together because divorce was disgraceful, the voices that have shamed those with addiction because of their struggle, or the voices that have made people question if they are still loveable because they attracted to someone of the same gender.

At so many times, to be faithful has been interpreted to hurt. And I can't help but think of a lyric from the Magnolia Electric Company, "hey so all of you folks in heaven not too a busy ringing the bells some of us down here aren't doing very well."

And yet... as is so often the case, Christ calls us to not to look so reductively at our reading nor so reductively at our world or what it means to be faithful. John's version of how Simon and Andrew end up with Jesus is not meant to contradict the other version but instead to help us explore more of that story. John offers us an opportunity to remember that the faithfulness of Simon and Andrew was not merely some pious aspiration but an exploration for both of them. When they followed Jesus they did not know what they would face, we know that because of how many times they didn't get it or messed up.

The faith of Simon and Andrew was not perfect, was not constrictive, and was not condemning. Their faith, the faith that we can aspire to, is the faith that motivated them and motivates us to be who God called calls us to be.

Jesus saw two fishermen and called them to be fishers of men. And in curiosity and faith, in the hopes of finding out who they were by following this strange prophet, they continued to follow him, not knowing what each day would hold. And I would dare to say that each of you has done the same. If you have worked as hard at a job as Simon and Andrew did in order to care for your family, if you have followed a call to be an artist, to sing, to study, to write, if you have greeted another person in love when you came through those doors or when you sat down for coffee hour, you have embodied that faith that John uplifts in the disciples this morning. I believe you have followed that Christian faith if you have explored those questions and pieces of your life that your priest or minister or church, perhaps even here though Lord I hope not, said you should not because it wasn't Christian but which you KNEW God had called you to.

As we hear John's story of Simon and Andrew, as we think about it in relation to the other versions that tell us how Jesus led them to be fishers of men, remember that to be faithful is to be present in your life and the life of those around you. God is calling you to a life of loving your neighbor as yourself. To be faithful is to try to follow that call, not knowing how you'll mess up, not knowing what may come, but believing that you and the world will be better for it. Amen.