

When no other choice will do

A sermon preached by the Rev'd Robert Bruce Edson in John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 25, 2009.

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. Mark 1:17-18

If you travel to the Holy Land today, you can walk along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and know that you are walking in the footsteps of Jesus. With all the changes of time and history, you feel Jesus' powerful presence there. The shafts of light coming through the ever changing clouds, the mountains in the distance and the fisherman casting their nets out on the water as they have done for centuries bring to life the story of Jesus calling the fishermen to join his mission.

Peter and his brother Andrew left their hometown of Bethsaida to settle in the village of Capernaum. The Hebrew for village is *kefar* and is named after the prophet Nahum, thus *kepharnahum* or Capernaum. It was there that Peter and Andrew formed a successful fishing business in partnership with James and John. You can still see the foundations of the large, roomy house where Peter lived with his extended family and where Jesus most likely stayed at the beginning of his ministry. Nearby is the site of the temple where he taught. The location of Capernaum is significant in that it was a commercial and cultural crossroads along the Damascus highway that provided a natural means for Jesus' message to be spread far and wide. Because relations with the Romans government were cordial, Capernaum became a culturally and economically advanced city. The people earned their livelihood as fishermen, farmers, merchants and artisans.

Those whom Jesus gathers together for his mission are simple folk. None are learned or wealthy and all spend long hours at their labors. Several are fishermen, one is a tax collector and another is a carpenter. While we know relatively little about the others, none are priests in the temple or officials of the government.

They have different temperaments. Peter is ruled by his impulsiveness and petulance; Thomas is a realist and therefore skeptical and doubtful; Andrew is friendly and reaches out to others while Matthew is aware that tax collectors are known for cheating. Judas keeps to himself and thinks Jesus' mission should be a political revolution. Jesus' remarkable insight into human character leads him to choose some of the least likely people to carry out his mission. He takes the twelve and gives them the benefit of the doubt to form them into a close knit group whose faith and commitment are the foundation of the church.

When Jesus approaches the fishermen, they simply stop what they are doing, drop their nets, leave their families and give up their livelihoods to be part of the mission of this itinerate preacher of whom they know very little. What compels them to make such a radical decision? More than likely it is Jesus' personal magnetism that draws them to him. It is not so much what he does or says, but who he is. He is totally authentic in every way. He offers them no comfort or a material reward, only the knowledge that they are doing God's work. While most of us would probably hesitate to accept such an offer, they welcome it. Of the twelve, all are willing to sacrifice their lives to get the message of the Good News out to the world. They spread out in different directions to publish the glad tidings of God's redeeming love. What binds them together is the sheer dynamic force of energy in the carpenter from Nazareth whose simple message of love means a whole new way of life.

When you respond to the call to follow Christ, it may seem to go against all logic, but it may be the first time you are sure that you are doing the right thing. It is as if there is no other choice. There is no time for hesitation. You take whatever skills or talents you have to be part of something much larger and more important than yourself.

The biggest change is your willingness to make amends in your life. It is making a 180-degree turn in an entirely new direction from serving your own interests to serving God's interests. It is turning around your whole self, your values, your loyalty, your goals and your objectives. Over the years I have had people from whom I haven't heard in years contact me because they are in a program to give up a compulsion or an addiction. They want to make amends for things I have long forgotten or never knew. They are starting over because they have made a commitment to change the way they are. Don't ever fall into the trap of excusing yourself because that's the way you are. We can all change our behavior.

Once we take Christ personally and seriously in our lives, we are never again the same. We gain a whole new set of priorities, a new center of gravity and a new perspective. It means speaking out against immorality, dishonesty and injustice at the risk of losing friends. It means making personal sacrifices to reach out to those who are hurting, grieving and alienated.

When Jesus calls together his disciples, they don't know what lies ahead; they only know that they are compelled to follow him. Just as Jesus enables that small band of ordinary people to do the extraordinary, so we can do what we never thought possible. Just as the fishermen leave their nets to follow Jesus, so we focus our lives and energies on what happens after we say 'yes' to Jesus. From then on, we make his story our story, his life our life.

Applied faith is full time job with long hours and little time off. Each time we extend ourselves to others, each time we show mercy and understanding, each time we take a stand for what is right, God is glorified.

In all things, always give God the glory.