

## Called

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 and Matthew 4:12-23

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I still remember the first fish I ever caught. I was five or six years old, fishing with a cane pole off the end of my grandparent's pier in Orange Beach. I sat as still as I could, intently watching that red and white bob float on the water, waiting to feel a tug on the line. I was thrilled beyond measure when at last the tug came, the bob dipped under the water, and my grandfather helped me pull in my first fish – a six-inch croaker. That was my introduction to fishing. It was a part of relaxing summer days and evenings at my grandparents' home throughout my childhood. Now my parents create those same memories with their grandchildren. For us, and for most people in our country, fishing is something to do for fun. It's a recreation activity, a hobby, a way to relax. In my family, we're always delighted when a fishing venture yields our supper, but even when there's no catch, we know we'll still eat. Many anglers don't keep the fish at all – just catch, snap a photo and release. For most, fishing isn't about food or livelihood. It's a chance to “get away from it all” – to leave behind cell phones and traffic jams, appointment books and to do lists, to go to a quiet place and just be for awhile. No wonder bumper stickers declare, “I'd rather be fishing.”

This is how we tend to think of fishing. But if we take our contemporary notions of fishing and apply them to the New Testament, we might really misunderstand what Jesus says as he calls his first disciples, when he tells them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” For, of course, fishing in the first century was a very different enterprise. Biblical scholar Sarah Breuer points out, “...fishing wasn't an escape from work for folks like Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John. It was work.” Fishing was a major industry in Galilee, and small-time fishermen like the pairs of brothers we meet in this morning's Gospel reading were just tiny cogs in the machine. Many fishermen didn't own their own boats and had to rent them. Even those who did own their own boats had to pay a “seemingly endless series of taxes and fees to gain fishing rights and work their trade.” The work itself was backbreaking and uncertain. When they were lucky enough to bring in a catch, more of it went to the already rich power brokers than to those whose hard labor got the fish out of the sea and into the processing plants and markets. Fishermen, even when they owned their own boats, were not their own bosses.<sup>1</sup> Their lives were filled with insecurity and extremely hard work.

And so, when Jesus said, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people,” he wasn't promising a day at the beach. He wasn't luring them in with a vision of the life of faith as leisurely and relaxing, the way we might think of fishing today. These men knew that fishing for fish was brutally hard. Fishing for people – the life of discipleship – would be hard, too.

Right off, we see one of the ways the life of faith is hard. When Jesus calls those first disciples, they respond immediately. It's clear that there is something so urgent and compelling about Jesus' call that they do not hesitate or delay. They immediately follow Jesus. And that means

dropping what they are doing, leaving some things behind so they can enter the new life to which Jesus calls them.

They left behind their nets and their boats, their very livelihood as fishermen. James and John even left behind their father Zebedee. That's the part of this passage that always haunts me. The story is about the call, about those first disciples. But my mind always lingers on poor Zebedee, there in the boat. Matthew suggests he was all alone. Mark says he stood there with the hired men. Either way, his sons are gone. This call from Jesus – this occasion of joy and promise and opportunity – this call from Jesus begins with loss. The loss of livelihood, the loss of family ties – the very things that had defined these men. They would still be fishermen, but now they would be fishing for people. Zebedee was still the father, but now they would understand themselves as children of God. This story reminds us that answering God's call begins with loss.

Now we are being called to something new, something new for my family and something new for the church. And like every change, this new thing to which we are called begins with loss. I'm getting ready to pack up my things here at the church. I'm wondering where on earth I'll put all my books in our little house, and what it will be like to drive by the Forbes House when I no longer have a key. But far more painful than moving my books and losing my office space is the loss I feel of relationships, which will change.

It has been my honor and privilege to serve these years as your pastor. You have encouraged and supported me and loved me well. And I have come to love you so very much. I will miss being your pastor. You have trusted me to lead you in the worship of God, to proclaim the Word to you, to stand with you through all the seasons of your lives. What a joy! What a privilege! I will miss sharing worship and Bible study and meals with you. I will even miss pulling my hair out as Stacie and I try to finish the newsletter on time. Even as I know that we are heeding God's call, I grieve that this season is ending. And so as we stand on the cusp of a new thing, it is fitting that we acknowledge that God's call begins first with loss. It is no day at the beach, this life of faith.

But the loss we experience when God calls us to something new is not the whole story, thanks be to God. There was a pastor who led a Bible study on this passage in a city jail. She asked the inmates if they thought it would be hard to leave just like that, immediately, as the disciples did, and they said, "No." "Why?" she asked. "Because it was Jesus," they answered. "You can trust Jesus," they said, "You can't trust anybody else."

When Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John, they left everything – nets and boats and even family – to follow him. They gave up one difficult, uncertain vocation for another difficult, uncertain vocation. But there was a difference: the boss. This was a boss they could trust. When they fished for fish, they answered to tax collectors and power brokers whose only interest was lining their own pockets and serving the powers that be. When they fished for people, they answered to Jesus. They answered to One who reminded them that they were not simply cogs in the machine, but precious children of God. One who taught that the peacemakers are blessed, and the last will be first, and the meek will inherit the earth. One who welcomed sinners and outcasts, and got even fishermen and those despised tax collectors to sit down at table together. The life of discipleship was not easy. It began with loss and continued with hard

work and bitter disappointments. But following Jesus, they found that in the life of discipleship, they gained more than they ever gave up. They received grace and dignity, freedom and peace, new relationships they never thought possible, a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

The challenges faced by those first disciples have been with Jesus' followers ever since. Fishing for people, that life of discipleship, is hard. The church at Corinth figured out pretty quickly that the discipleship was no day at the beach. Paul wrote his first letter to the church at Corinth because he had heard news of their bickering. Through the grapevine, he had gotten word that this diverse church was on the verge of meltdown. This was a church that Paul spent time with, nurturing them in the life of faith. It had people from all walks of life, from different ethnic backgrounds and social classes, all trying to figure out how to be church together. After Paul left, things began to fall apart. One of the ways they expressed their disputes was by forming factions and allegiances based on which leader they followed. "I belong to Paul" or "I belong to Cephas" or "I belong to Apollos." Paul correct them: No, you belong to Christ. We all do. Paul urges them to be united in the same mind and the same purpose, one people because they follow one Lord, Jesus Christ.

Perhaps I've told you that during seminary, I had a professor who was fond of telling us students, "It's not about you." He taught a class that we took as part of our internships. Students would come in agonizing because the senior pastor never gave clear instructions, or they didn't get along with the youth director, or no one had shown up at their Bible study. Inevitably, and to the great irritation of the students, the professor would remind us, "It's not about you." Of course the longer I'm in the ministry, the more I appreciate the wisdom of his response. You welcomed me here when I was as green as could be, and patiently supported me as I learned the ropes. Early on I worried terribly about whether I was making the right decisions. Eventually got a little nudging, I think from the Holy Spirit, that said, "Leanne, this church has been here for over a hundred years and it will be here for a long time after you go." Remembering that, I still tried to be faithful and deliberate in my decisions, but I let go of the illusion that this is "my" church or under my control.

That's what Paul is reminding the church at Corinth. The church doesn't belong to Paul or Apollos or Cephas. It doesn't belong to the members. It belongs to Christ. And when we follow Christ, when we keep our eyes fixed on him, then we can really be church.

That's what I have seen in you over these years. I have seen what you can do in this church when we remember that it is Jesus that we follow.

I have seen you do the hard work of listening to one another and working together to come to agreement on our building renovation, so that our young people will have a safe place to learn and so the elderly member with a walker or the college student in a wheelchair can come and worship with us. When it would have been easier to give up, you did not. You stuck together and you have faced these changes with grace and humor.

I have seen you taking tender care of one another during times of crisis and need.

I have seen you wrestle with Scripture and grow in your faith.

I have you dig deep into pockets to respond to a special need.

I have seen you give countless gifts – sharing your music and arranging flowers and trimming hedges and visiting the lonely.

I have seen you labor over delicious meals so that homeless women can have something good to eat.

I have seen you welcome newcomers and take college students to lunch and delight in babies and toddlers as they make noise during worship.

I have seen in you glimpses of the kingdom of God.

These things are not you or me. They are Christ in us. They are what the church can be and do when we remember the one we are called to follow, when we keep our eyes fixed on him. When God calls us to something new, that call often begins with loss. But it does not end there. For when we answer that call, Jesus accompanies us every step of the way. And in following him, we gain more than we ever lose. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Dylan Breuer, available at [www.sarahlaughed.net](http://www.sarahlaughed.net), January 17, 2005