

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 4:18-22

¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

MESSAGE: WHO'S ASKING?

Let me tell you a story about some fish who lived in a very small puddle of water.

They spent their days swimming about, fighting with each other. They fought over space, who would get to be in the sunny part and who would be in the shade; they fought over friends and mates, who would be allowed into their little gangs and who would be excluded; and they fought over every tiny bug or scrap of food that dropped into their little puddle.

In such a tiny puddle there wasn't much else to do other than fight, and life never seemed to change for the puddle fish.

Until one day there was a great splash, and suddenly among them was a brightly coloured fish. He was covered in red, and blue, and green, and had golden fins. What was even more unusual was that he wasn't fighting or pushing the other fish but looking around and smiling.

One of the puddle fish worked up enough courage to approach the newcomer. ‘Who are you? Where do you come from?’

‘I come from the sea.’ answered the Bright Fish.

‘The sea? What is the sea?’

The Bright Fish was surprised. ‘You don't know about the sea? Why, the sea is what fish are made for! How can I explain the sea to you? Well ... it isn't like this little puddle; it's endless! You don't have to swim in little circles all day, you can dance with the tides. Life isn't lived in the shade - the sun arches over the waves in silver and crimson! And there are many splendid sea-creatures, more than you could possibly imagine. It's endless, it's clear; the sea is what fish are made for!’

One of the Puddlefish asked ‘How do we get to this sea?’

‘It's not too hard.’ Replied the Bright Fish, pointing to the edge of the puddle. ‘If you just jump over that root there you will land in the river. The current of the river will bring you to the sea.’

The Puddlefish considered this for a long moment, until one fish swam forward with a determined look in his eye. This fish was a Realist Fish.

‘It’s all well and good to talk about this sea business,’ he said, ‘but we have to face reality. And the reality is that we need to swim in circles and hunt for waterbugs. Life is struggle, life is hard, and it takes a real fish to face the facts. Obviously you’ve dreamed up this sea as some kind of fantasy to shield you from reality.’

The Bright Fish smiled. ‘You may think so, but I know the sea is real. I’ve been there, that’s where I come from. It’s such a wonderful...’ But the Realist Fish had already swum off.

A second fish approached – a nervous, twitchy fish. ‘You think we should just jump over that root over there? We don’t know what lies on the other side – it could be anything. Even if I made it to the river, I’m just a small fish. I’d be swept away, I wouldn’t have any control!’

The Bright Fish whispered to him. ‘Just trust me. Trust that the river will take you some place good.’ But he was speaking to the water, as the Nervous Fish had already hurried away.

Finally, up swam a very solemn and learned fish. He pulled out a sheaf of notes and adjusted his spectacles. ‘My brothers and sisters, our distinguished visitor has expressed many views which certainly merit consideration. However, the fish who already live in this humble puddle have also expressed many views which merit consideration. By all means, let us be reasonable. Why don’t we form a committee? We can meet every Thursday at six. We’ll get to the bottom of this.’

The eyes of the Bright Fish were sad. ‘Talking is important.’ He said. ‘But in the end this is a simple matter. You jump. You all need to jump out of this puddle and trust that the river will take you to the sea. Don’t you realize that summer is coming?’

‘Summer? Why is that important? What difference does that make?’

‘This puddle was created by the spring rains.’ Explained the Bright Fish. ‘But no puddle lasts forever. The summer sun will dry this puddle up and you will have no where to go.’

Suddenly the Realist Fish was back in front. ‘That’s just like you religious types.’ He spat out. ‘You have no proof and so you just try to scare people – you’re one of those end-of-the-puddle fanatics!’

The Bright Fish merely repeated. ‘It is a simple matter. You jump from this little puddle, and trust that the river will take you to the sea. Who will come and follow me?’

At first no one moved, but then a few Puddlefish swam to his side. Together they jumped into the river, and the current swept them away. The remaining puddle-fish were quiet for a long time. Then once again they began to swim in circles and hunt for waterbugs.

This story is a bit of a fun and relatable illustration of how we react to an invitation into the unknown. The gospel scripture this morning is also a story about an invitation into the unknown; the story of Jesus calling his first disciples. We tend to take this little narrative for granted because we're familiar with the story. But if we take the time to put ourselves into the narrative we may find that it's not so simple as it seems.

As Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee – which is really a lake – it's fresh water – he encountered a pair of men casting a net. Fishing. As he walked by he called out 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.' Immediately Peter and Andrew dropped their nets and followed.

Next Jesus encountered James and John, in the boat with their father mending nets. He called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed.

In both these encounters Matthew used the word immediately. It's simple really – Jesus calls, and disciples follow. No questions – no doubts.

But is it really that easy? Peter and Andrew dropped their nets and followed. That's a really big deal. The nets were their livelihood – how they made their money – how they fed their families. Can you imagine a contractor walking away from his truck and tools? A programmer leaving her laptop full of code on a table in a coffeeshop? Is it really that easy to do – leaving your old life behind?

What about James and John? They left their nets – but also a boat, and their father. This seems to be a larger operation than what Peter and Andrew were engaged in. More physical assets, more employees. And yet Matthew uses the same word – immediately.

But it can't have been that simple a decision, could it? Remember the three fish – Reality was the first one. We can't simply do what you ask and follow. We have to keep swimming in circles and hunting waterbugs. This is what we do, what we've always done.

If we leave our nets and follow you, how will we eat? Where are we going to live? What's going to happen to us? What will happen to my father if I leave him alone with the family business but no sons to help him? These questions had to have crossed the minds of the brothers who were called.

The second fish was Fear. What if I jump into the river and lose control? So, what if it doesn't work out, Jesus? I've left my nets, disappointed my father, there is no going back. At least here in the boat I have some control, I know what each day will bring – even if I don't particularly like it.

Have you ever worked a job that you hated? Or been in a relationship that is poisoned? Isn't it interesting how we cling to the security of miserable situations? I remember working a job for years in which I had to deal with vats of bubbling, boiling hydrochloric acid with no ventilation, constant exposure to aluminum based paints, ketones, exposed induction coils carrying 26 000 volts, working with molten zinc and aluminum with no protection. That factory eventually put me in the hospital – I was paralysed for a summer due to the constant chemical exposure.

You know what? When I got out the hospital I went back to that factory. I did unionize it and made some significant changes, but I went back to the wretched prison that I knew. I had a family to raise. I had waterbugs to catch. That is how deep this reality and fear justification runs. We will hold onto 'the way things are' even when it makes us miserable – even when it is killing us. Those first disciples had to wrestle with the fear of giving up the comfort of predictability.

The third fish was the 'there's no hurry' fish. He was the one who offered a committee as a solution. 'We should talk, discuss. Let's not rush things.' But the problem is that life is always on the move. Life does not always wait for us to endlessly debate.

In our gospel Jesus was walking by and offered an invitation to both pair of brothers. He didn't give them an option of conferring and considering, get back to me next Tuesday – once he was gone, they wouldn't know where he was. Their window of opportunity was defined – they had to make their decisions.

And they did. They chose to follow. They wrestled with Reality, Fear, and Hesitation, but they chose to follow Jesus.

That's a lovely story – their courage and conviction is inspiring, and the lesson we draw from this is that we should all aspire to follow Jesus when he calls – even if it seems difficult, or scary, or hasty.

So we tuck this information away and get on with our day. Surely if Jesus were to speak to us we would faithfully follow – because we're good folk, that's what we do. But to me, the real question is not so much 'would I follow Jesus,' but 'would I recognize when it is Jesus who is calling?'

I think that we are facing just such a discernment right now as a congregation. I think we are being invited into something a little new, and a little scary. But definitely something that will transform us into better fishers of people.

There are some ministries that are needed here at St. Paul's. They have been needed for some time.

One of them is a singles ministry. I'm not talking about a dating service – but a ministry whose focus is to look after the needs of single adults. We have plenty of folks here who are living alone and it can feel awkward or tiring for some to attend events that always seem to be designed for couples and families. They would benefit from a ministry that offers companionship, encouragement, support; opportunities to deepen faith and deepen relationships and know that with God they are complete; they are whole.

Another ministry we have need of is one geared toward bereavement and grief. Many among us have lost parents, spouses – even children – in the short time that I have been here. As a congregation we are great at supporting folks in times of crisis, but as the weeks go on and the grief and loss remains like a stone on our hearts, how do we cope? How do we keep going?

There is a particular kind of support that is needed to help us on the path toward healing. And as we face the reality that we are an aging congregation within an aging town, we can clearly see that this need for Christian guidance through the process of bereavement is only going to grow. And not just for ourselves. This will help heal our community.

Our third ministry need is in the area of children. We are blessed with a decent crew of kids – more than many churches our size. You will notice that most of them are high school age or just getting ready for high school. At this age they are forming their identities; discovering who they are and who they would like to be. What we pour into them now will bear fruit later in life – this is the moment to invest our energies of love and time, to give them the foundations of faith that will help to guide them as they prepare to head out into the world.

These three ministries – singles, bereavement, and youth – have two things in common. They are greatly needed here, and they are beyond our present abilities to implement. There simply aren't enough hours in a day for me to personally attend to all these things, and the volunteers that we have are likewise spread thin. They're getting tired – too tired to begin new ministries, no matter how much they may be needed.

To address this, the Christian Nurture committee, which oversees Christian Education, has proposed that we hire someone who can step into these ministry vacancies. Session has endorsed this idea. Ultimately, this decision will be made by all of you at our annual meeting in a few weeks.

Those fish named Reality, Fear, and Hesitation swim among us. We currently don't have a Christian Educator on staff – it's not the way we do things. I would point out that we have in the past had paid Christian Educators here at St. Paul's – some more successful than others. But it is something new for us right now, especially with the addition of the Singles and Bereavement ministries.

There is also an element of fear. We anticipate that bringing on a new person will cost us around \$30 000 a year. That's not insignificant. There are no plans to add to this year's budget,

but starting in 2021 we would have to do so, which means that we will all need to reassess our givings to the church.

And there is also a spirit of hesitation – can we put this off for another year, or two, or ten? Do we really have to make a decision now?

All of these questions and concerns are real, and valid. They need to be considered thoughtfully. But there is another question that takes precedence, one that needs to be asked and answered first.

‘Is it Jesus who is issuing this invitation?’ That’s the most important question, and really the only question. This is the question that I am inviting all of you to consider. I am asking that you spend some serious time praying about this; searching your spirit, reading what scripture has to say.

After all, we are all good people – each one of us would certainly drop our nets and follow Jesus if he asked us to. So, is Jesus asking us to drop our security and follow him by committing to bringing a new person on board?

To paraphrase Gamaliel: ‘If this idea is of human origin, it will fail. But if this is God’s idea, nothing will be able to stand in His way, and if anything dares to it certainly ought not to be us!’

So, pray. Listen. Discern. If this course is my idea, reject it. You don’t follow me.

But if you sense Jesus’ invitation to drop what we’re doing and become fishers of people; if your hearts are burning within you; if your soul is crying out in longing; if your spirit is resonating like a tuning fork then there is no option, and no excuse.

I pray that the Spirit speaks to each one of you to give you clarity, conviction, and purpose, and the courage to act upon it.

Amen.