

“Repent...And Follow Me!”

*Sermon prepared by the Rev. Douglas Clark for January 25, 2015 – Epiphany III/Ordinary III
First Congregational Church, Haddam, CT*

5 *“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”*

Scripture: *Mark 1:1-20*

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

10 “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
 who will prepare your way;
 ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
 ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight!’”

15 ⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of
repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean
countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and
were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John
was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he
20 ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more
powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and
untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will
baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by
25 John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he
saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I
am well pleased.”

¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in
30 the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild
beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus
came to Galilee, proclaiming the good
35 news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is
fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come
near; repent, and believe in the good
news.” ¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea
of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother



40 Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus
said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸And
immediately they left their nets and followed him.



¹⁹As he went a little farther, he
saw James son of Zebedee and
his brother John, who were in
their boat mending the nets.
²⁰Immediately he called them;
and they left their father
Zebedee in the boat with the
hired men, and followed him.

The beginning of the Gospel of Mark is breathless and urgent. If these twenty verses were to be arranged as the script for a theater production, the script would consist of four brief scenes in quick succession. Set designs would need to be simple and easy to rearrange. As soon as the house lights went down, the audience in the darkened theater would hear the voice of a narrator, speaking the first three verses.

Immediately following verse three (“Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight”), stage lights would come up, illuminating a crowd of people, with John the Baptist, wearing a coat of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, front and center. John would be preaching about repentance, and people would be stepping forward to receive baptism (probably by kneeling and having water poured over their heads). As soon as John says, “I have baptized you with water; but [the one who is coming after me] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit,” the stage goes dark.

When the stage lights come up again, we see the crowds in the background, and John and Jesus front and center. Jesus kneels before John, John pours water over his head, and as Jesus begins to stand up, a bright light shines above the stage, and a male voice from above says, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” Then a female voice from above says, “Go immediately into the wilderness! The adversary will test you, and wild beasts will be there with you, but angels will watch over you.”

Once again, the stage goes dark, and remains dark for forty seconds (representing Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness)—which can feel like a long time, since we are so unaccustomed to silence in social gatherings.

The silence is broken by rustling on stage, as the four fishermen take their places on the stage behind Jesus, and Jesus stands up, facing the audience. We in the audience hear the narrator’s voice, speaking this verse: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.” Then a spotlight illuminates Jesus as he speaks directly to the audience: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Two of the fishermen—Simon and Andrew—are casting nets; when Jesus turns around and approaches them and calls them to follow him, they drop their nets and go with him as he approaches James and John, who are mending their nets. Likewise, when Jesus calls James and John to follow him, they drop their nets; then the five of them walk together down the center aisle and out the door.

The breathless pace of Mark’s account of the beginnings of Jesus’ public ministry clearly intends to convey the urgency of Jesus’ message. This urgency is twofold: first, it’s a message about the nearness of the reign of God, the empire of God. And second, it’s a message about Jesus’ need to gather a community of followers who will be captivated by a similar sense of urgency. Remarkably, even though the message of the nearness of the reign of God requires the practice of repentance, this message is good news. Amazingly, Jesus’ first followers, who responded without hesitation to his urgent call, were fishermen

In the first-century Galilean economy in which today's Gospel reading is set, fishing with nets was hard work, whether casting one's nets from the shore or from a boat. The fishing itself was typically done at night, so that the daytime hours could be devoted to marketing the catch—and to paying all the various taxes that were levied on the fish that one had caught.

Fishing nets were often damaged in the course of a night's work, and so the fisherfolk had to mend their nets during the daylight hours. Although the text does not tell us the time of day when Jesus was walking along the shore, I suspect it might have been early in the morning, when Simon and Andrew were just finishing up their night's labor, when James and John had just begun to mend their nets.

What did Jesus mean when he said to these two sets of brothers, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people"? In the Hebrew Bible, which was the Bible of Jesus and Simon and Andrew and James and John, the fishing net is mostly used as a metaphor for God's judgment. The net that God casts will be used to capture those in Israel who have been unfaithful to the covenant, so that they can be brought before God who will judge them. Only in the prophet Ezekiel is the net used in a positive sense, as part of an extended metaphor for the renewal of the Temple.

Jesus' use of this metaphor, like that of Ezekiel, has more to do with bringing others into the discipleship community, into his particular renewal movement within Judaism, than it does with judgment. To be sure, when you're drawn into the discipleship community, you're certainly aware of God's judgment, and of your own need for confession and repentance; but you're even more aware of the good news of God's mercy, and of your opportunity to find forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace.

Jesus' invitation to the four fishermen does not have to do with divine judgment, but rather with human community. Jesus is not inviting Simon and Andrew and James and John to reel in sinners, one by one. Rather, he is inviting these four fishermen to be his first followers in the religious renewal movement he has already initiated through his call to repentance. And they in turn will invite many others into this new community that is enlightened and enlivened by the nearness, by the imminence, of the reign of God. They will be Jesus' servants and co-workers in a ministry of spiritual awakening based on repentance and renewal.

When you cast your nets into the sea, you will catch many different kinds of fish. This Jesus community, this renewal movement, this spiritual awakening will include many different kinds of people. When your nets are damaged, you have to stop fishing for a time and take that time to mend those damaged nets. This Jesus community will not be free of flaws, and it will sometimes be necessary for the community to take stock of itself and acknowledge its flaws and mend those flaws.

The work of Galilean fisherfolk was hard work. So too the work of building the beloved community, and rebuilding the beloved community, whether in the first century or in the twenty first century, can sometimes be hard work. Jesus knew this would be

hard work, especially in a time when his people were oppressed by the Romans and divided among themselves—which is probably why his very first followers had to leave their professions behind and their possessions behind in order to follow him.

135 I have some problems with this story—or perhaps more with some interpretations of this story—when I seek to connect this text with my own life and with the lives of congregations I have pastored during the past four decades. I'll put these problems in the form of a question. Is the story of Jesus' calling the four fishermen to follow him the one authentic pattern for Christian discipleship? Is it only possible to follow Jesus when we
140 are willing to leave our possessions and our professions behind?

Here's one answer to this question, from Mike Slaughter. He's a United Methodist pastor who, unlike most Methodist clergy, has served one congregation, the Ginghamburg, Ohio United Methodist Church, for more than thirty years. He describes himself as the “chief dreamer of Ginghamburg and the spiritual entrepreneur of ministry marketplace innovations.” (This is certainly a non-traditional view of the role of a
145 congregation's senior pastor, but I have to say I'm intrigued by it.)

Anyway, here's how Mike Slaughter describes what it means to be following Jesus. “Jesus' followers,” he writes, “are not waiting for heaven but are actively rebuilding, restoring, and renewing the lives of broken people and the shattered communities of despair.”¹ Isn't this pretty much what Jesus and his first-century followers were all about—
150 renewing the lives of broken people and rebuilding a shattered community of despair? And isn't it abundantly clear that Jesus of Nazareth was not the Lone Ranger (one of my childhood heroes), but rather a community organizer of the first order?

When we in this church testify to our faith in the words of the UCC Statement of Faith, we say that “God calls us into the church, to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be God's servants in the service of others.” Christianity of the twenty-first century, like the Jesus community of the first century, is not about the singular me. It's about the plural us. It's about us together, following Jesus, cooperating with his Spirit, restoring broken lives and renewing anxious communities. It's about us together, casting our
160 nets of compassion into troubled waters. It's about us together, mending those same nets, when we've lost sight of what we're about.

And, yes, the Christian community of the twenty-first century, like the Jesus community of the first century, is also about repentance. It's about the sober acknowledgment that, regardless of who we are or where we are on life's journey, we have screwed
165 up. We have done things we know we ought not to have done. We have neglected to do things we know we ought to have done. So we need to repent—like the inhabitants of the great city of Nineveh in the time of Jonah. We need to repent—like those in Palestine among whom Jesus ministered.

1 From the cover of a pamphlet describing an April 2014 “Ginghamburg Missional Conference.”

170 We need to say we're sorry. To say it to God. To say it to one another. To receive forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace from God. To offer forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace to one another.

175 The truth of the matter is, unless and until we repent, we cannot fully be the beloved community. We cannot fully reach our potential as Jesus' followers. Human experience teaches us time and again that there is healing power in repentance—in saying “I'm sorry” and hearing “I forgive you”—in hearing “I'm sorry” and saying “I forgive you.”

180 Repentance is the recognition that in broken relationships, no one person or group is solely at fault—but all are responsible, not only for the brokenness but also for the healing of that relationship. Not only does repentance restore the bonds of community. Not only does repentance renew the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness. It also frees the power of love. Repentance is like mending our nets. And the power of love is like casting our mended nets into the sea and witnessing a miraculous catch of fish.

185 Those words that Jesus spoke in the first century—repent and follow and fish for people—continue to reverberate in our century. In the beautiful words of the great Christian theologian and musician and humanitarian Albert Schweitzer:

190 Jesus “comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks the same word, 'Follow thou Me' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our times. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an [inexpressible] mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”²

2 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Cited in John Ackerman, *Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in Congregations* (The Alban Institute, 2001), 96.