

The River: Going Fishing
Matthew 4:18-22

Dr. J. Howard Olds
September 12, 2004

Today's sermon is contained in a Sunday School song some of us learned as children. If you know it, sing it with me:

I will make you fishers of men, fishers of men, fishers of men.
I will make you fishers of men, if you follow Me.
If you follow Me, if you follow Me,
I will make you fishers of men, if you follow Me.

Along the shores of Galilee Jesus called fishermen to become fishers of people. Beyond the tumult of our life's wild restless sea, Jesus is still saying, "Follow Me."

Jesus Calls Us, Are We Following?

The text is so simple, yet so profound. Jesus calls Peter and Andrew and "At once they left their nets and followed him." Jesus calls James and John and the writer of Matthew says, "Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him." There was urgency about this call and spontaneity to its response to follow. Are you following Jesus today?

To follow is to **BEGIN**. The longest journey starts with a single step. We can hesitate making up our minds but we cannot hesitate making up our lives, for our lives are being made up one way or another. And so it is that Jesus calls us to decide, to make a decision and to follow that decision.

Did you hear about the American Procrastination Society? They postponed their annual meeting another year. It seems the executive committee put off meeting so long that it became impossible to book a location. They intended to decide but they never quite got around to it!

When it comes to Christ and the Church, some of us are procrastinators. We hang around the premises but cannot bring ourselves to stand on the promises. We enjoy the show but never join the action. We are spectators, option tenders, pew sitters and balcony lovers. All the while Jesus is inviting us to become followers. "Will you follow Me?" The question is simple and straightforward and yet it is life changing. Be aware of what He is calling us to; He is calling us to follow.

The Invitation is to follow. Maybe we fail to follow because all the emphasis these days is on leadership. The stores are full of books on leadership but you cannot

find a single title about “following” and yet it is following to which Jesus calls us. “Will you come and follow Me?”

There was a young woman who wanted to go to college. Her heart sank, however, when she read the question on the application form which asked, “Are you a leader?” Being both honest and conscientious she answered the question “No” as her hopes for admission diminished. In a few weeks, however, she received a letter from the Admissions Office welcoming her to the college of her choice. Among other things the letter said, “In reviewing the upcoming freshmen class we noted that it will contain 1452 leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that all these leaders have at least one follower.” Will you become a follower of Jesus Christ? To follow is to begin; you must start somewhere.

To follow is to **ABIDE**. Jesus put it this way. “If you abide in me, my words abide in you. Ask whatever you wish and it will be given.” We become Christ-like by abiding, connecting, hanging around, learning and following.

Can you imagine what a consulting firm might have said about Jesus’ disciples? “Thanks for submitting the resumes of the twelve men selected for management positions in your new organization. All of them have taken our battery of tests and we have run their results through our computer. It is our professional opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background for the type of work they will be doing. Simon Peter is emotionally unstable. Andrew shows no qualities of leadership. James and John place personal advancement above company loyalty. In fact, the only person with a keen business mind is Judas Iscariot. Take him and let the rest go.”

But Jesus did not call a consulting firm when He called His disciples. He asked fishermen, and tax collectors, and people with absolutely no experience in theology or religion at all, to come and let “Me” teach you how to change the world. Just come and “be with Me” in our joys and in our sorrows, in people’s homes and highways and byways of life. Just “abide with Me” and by living with Me you will learn to be like Me. Isn’t that true? It happens all the time, we become like the people we spend time with. We become very much like the people we admire.

To follow is to do what Jesus did, to think like he thought, to act like he acted, to value what He valued. I remember in seminary preaching class years ago, being criticized for sounding too much like Bishop Roy Short in my preaching. At that time Roy Short was my spiritual hero. He laid hands on me and ordained me into the ministry. Besides, he was the best storyteller I ever heard. For me to imitate him in the pulpit was a compliment not a criticism. I took it as a compliment. We become like the people we admire; and so Jesus asks us to ‘follow Me, walk with Me for awhile, learn My values, understand My priorities in life, set your life according to My plans for you.’

Oh that we who call ourselves Christian could become what we call ourselves. Is that not one of our main problems in the world? We call ourselves a Christian nation. Yet we worship wealth, rely on our military might, and export the values of Hollywood. Where are the values of Christ reflected in America? No wonder the world hates us and extremists want to wage holy wars against us. Where are the values of Jesus in our ways of life?

To follow is to **OBEY**. On this anniversary weekend of September 11, we pause to remember how firefighters and paramedics waded into those towering infernos giving their lives in attempts to rescue others. We recall how businessmen, on their way to work that fateful morning, wrestled down hijackers aboard an airplane and crashed it in a field instead of the White House. They were ordinary people willing to do extraordinary things for the sake of others.

We think about our men and women in military service, some of them your sons and daughters, friends and relatives, who obey orders even when their lives are on the line. They are willing to do their duty to defend their country, even though more than a 1000 of them have now lost their lives in this war.

When it comes to obedience, I think about Thomas and the other disciples when Jesus decides to return to riot-prone Jerusalem to comfort Mary and Martha and raise their brother Lazarus from the dead. They plead with Jesus not to go. Then Thomas finally says to the others, "Let us go that we may die with him." An old hymn puts it this way:

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

Jesus Calls Us, Are We Following?

"Come, follow Me and I will make you fishers of people." In the summer of 2001, Jens Oveson was fishing for salmon in Central Norway's Gaula River when he was swept away by a strong current. Kiell Wilhemsen spotted Jens' struggling. He had fished on that river for 25 years. Kiell knew where the current would carry Jens. So Kiell ran across the bridge and was waiting for Jens as the current carried him down river. As he came near, Kiell started casting for Jens. He hooked him by his rubber boots. Kiell, using every trick he knew, managed to reel this 250-pound man in, without breaking his line. "I will make you fishers of men, if you follow Me."

It seems to me that mainline churches have become satisfied to be keepers of the aquarium instead of leading fishing expeditions. We are great at building structures, measuring water levels, and admiring the diversity of our fish. But we are so consumed with keeping the aquarium that we have abandoned fishing.

Where are the post-modern Harry Denman's, that lay leader of evangelism in our denomination who asked people in bars, restaurants, airplanes and buses all over

the world to pray for him? In so doing, he opened the door to become an ambassador for Christ.

There are Principles of Fishing that Christians Need to Know

If you want to fish, you have to be in the right place. Joyce Wright tells about fishing a mountain stream with her husband Norm. We had been there about three hours and fished in five or six different places when Norm got this big grin on his face and said, “Now we can really start fishing, we know where the fish aren’t!”

It is hard to catch fish where there are no fish. I have a challenge for you. Today you move into spacious new Sunday school areas. Some of you have been claiming for years that there is no room in your class. That is true no more. Will you fill your classrooms with new people by Christmas? I want to see 2,000 people in Sunday school by December. You have the space to do it, now you have room. It is time to go fishing. Who are your friends, relatives, acquaintances, and neighbors who are un-churched? It is time to fish.

Where are creative places to fish? Herm Haakenson started a Sunday school in a nursing home that was near his church. They were not able to come to church so he went to them. Now he and his wife Trish are publishing Christian materials for particular use in nursing homes. A couple of our members are teaching Disciple Bible Study in the women’s prison. May their numbers increase dramatically. Over 100 young adults gather in our Chapel each Monday night for worship and fellowship. Now other churches are trying to copy this outreach ministry. The fishing is good. Our new youth center will be open for teenagers on Friday and Saturday nights. It is time to find new and creative ways to fish.

If you want to fish, you have to do it the right way. Jimmy Carter, in his book Sources of Strength, tells about meeting Eloy Cruz, a Cuban pastor with incredible rapport with very poor immigrants. “What is the secret to your success?” asked former President Carter. Reverend Cruz replied, “Señor Jimmy, we all need to have two loves in our lives. First for God, and second, for the person who happens to be looking us in the eye right now.”

I remember another time when Jesus catches up with Peter on the Sea of Galilee. Peter has followed and failed. Jesus has been crucified and risen. Peter thought he was finished with discipleship. Jesus needed him more now than ever before. So in what I call the Last Breakfast, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” As he gently restores Peter to the fold, He invites him to an endless mission. “Peter, feed my sheep.”

Love, love, love, love – the gospel, in a word, is love. Christ did not come to scare people out of hell but to love them into the kingdom of God. Love finds a way.

If you want to fish, it needs to be the right time. The right word spoken in the right way, at the right time for the right reason to the right person, will make a

world of difference. It takes patience to fish, some of you have been praying for family and friends for a lifetime. *In God's time, in God's time, he makes all things beautiful in his time.* God is not in a hurry. He has the time for you.

Jesus calls us to follow and to fish. Some of you today need to start following. You need to unite with this church and join this fishing expedition. I am going to ask you to fill out the card in the bulletin. Get out of your pew and come forward on the hymn of Invitation. Today we are fishing for you.