

“Follow Me”

Mark 1:14-20

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If you are an avid reader, you know that you do not get to pick the stories that stay with you. Sometimes there are characters or plots or details from particular stories that are deeply embedded in your memory no matter how many books you have read or how much time has passed.

One story I have carried with me for the last five years is a biography by Dave Eggers called *Zeitoun*. *Zeitoun* is the last name and nickname of a Syrian American man who lived in New Orleans with his wife and three children. They lived there during Hurricane Katrina, and while his wife and children fled the city, *Zeitoun* stayed to watch over their home and the various properties they owned. After the levees broke, he used his canoe to explore his neighborhood each day. He took food to dogs that had been abandoned and were stranded in their homes. He found people who were stuck on their roofs, and he found a friend with a motor boat who could pick them up and deliver them to safety. His deeds eventually took an unexpected turn that will require you to pick up the book yourself to find out about, but they also made a huge impact on the people he helped. It was only maybe four or five people, but they were people that probably would have died if he had not been there with his canoe.

In the book, *Zeitoun* encounters the emergency response teams sent by the government, but his experience – not unlike more recent experiences with people living in Puerto Rico - was that often they were so restricted by the orders they were given, and so governed by fear, that they did little to help individuals who truly needed it. Unfortunately, most of us are familiar with

the problems that transpired in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina between residents of the city and the government workers. At one point Zeitoun told a government official the address of someone who was sick and needed evacuating. They promised to be there within the hour, and several hours later after help not arriving, it was Zeitoun himself who got the sick person to safety. There were hundreds of relief workers sent, and many of them did a lot of good, but often it was the courageous acts of individuals that made the biggest impact after Hurricane Katrina. The quality of help that one person was able to provide trumped the quantity of official rescuers sent to the city.

Our Gospel lesson today lifts up the difference between quantity and quality. The brothers Simon and Andrew are fishermen. Jesus invites them to join him to fish for people, but it requires that they lay down their nets. I imagine that as they lay down their nets, they pick up a fishing pole, because they are about to go from catching large quantities of fish in one swoop to catching one person at a time. We come to see in Jesus' ministry with disciples that the biggest transformations happen when they encounter people one-on-one or in small groups. The woman at the well, raising Jairus' daughter, Mary and Martha, the transfiguration with just a few disciples on top of a mountain. There are often crowds looking on, but it is in the personal conversations and intimate encounters that we see the transformative power of Jesus' life giving love. The people who shout the Good News the loudest are the ones that personally experienced Jesus' healing powers. Later when Jesus sent out the disciples two by two they would do the same work, going into homes, meeting with people in small groups or individually, and transforming their lives.

And yet, this call to focus on the individual is counter-intuitive to our usual instincts. When we want something to flourish, we often think, "More!" For companies, this means more consumers, more products, more sales, more money. For events this means more food, more

people, more entertainment, more money. For churches, this means more members, more programs, more pledges, more money. We cast our nets, hoping to have the broadest reach and biggest gain possible, but isn't it true that when fishermen pull up their nets, they are often uncertain of what will be in there? When your only means of ministry is casting a net, it is impossible to develop the kind of individual, personalized relationships and connections to God that are necessary to develop a strong faith community. Our faith community is not synonymous with more. It is synonymous with deeper relationships and deeper love.

How often do we get caught up in the business and the numbers of being a church? And that isn't to say that numbers are not important. I greatly appreciate the numbers that fund our education and mission programs. I'm thankful for all the people who manage our numbers and make sure those numbers continue to appear. But, like everything else, that has to be held in balance. I'm not just talking about financial numbers, I'm also talking about people numbers. Often, when we compare congregations, we ask, "how many people attend your church?" The size of that number is supposed to be a direct indicator of the health and vitality of the congregation. The implication is that the higher the number, the better that place must be. But, to go back to the gospel story, if we only use nets, it is hard to keep track of the fish that we catch. How will we know if we have minnows or tuna? How will we know if a person slips away unnoticed or if another is here out of obligation but isn't being spiritually fed?

Laying our nets down to focus on the depth of our faith is a challenge and opportunity that is available to every single one of us in this congregation. Laying down our nets requires us to learn new skills and ask new questions. Our worship leaders should explore how our worship touches people at the core of their souls. How will we know if the songs we sing or the music we play in worship makes the hair on our arms stand up? In committee meetings, how will we know if our members feel the two hours they are present each month is rewarding and faith affirming,

or if we are sitting there, counting the minutes until we can slip out? In our youth and children's programs, can we tell the difference between the kids who are here each week because their parents make them or because they feel a sense of belonging? How can we transform in such a way that even more of our kids and youth *want* to be here instead of assuming they *HAVE* to attend? For each one of us who sits in the pews, how will we know that the people who are on our left and our right feel a sense of belonging in this congregation? How will we know that a new visitor will return the next week feeling less like a visitor and more like this is their church?

The best way to find out is to open ourselves to inquiry. We can only know by entering into deeper relationships with one another—relationships that require us to ask questions, be open to dialogue, and be open to doing things in new ways. When was the moment you first felt you belonged here? What committee or ministry did you first participate in that made you think, “Wow! I really made a difference.” And if you don't yet have that sense, what would make you feel like your presence matters? Come find me with your answers and ideas—I really want to know! So often we do things with the hope that it will attract dozens or even hundreds of people to show up or participate or be a new member. So often we cast our nets, caring more about the quantity than the quality.

The tendency to focus on the more! Bigger! and Better! happens to all of us. This weekend is the one year anniversary of the Women's March on Washington. It was the largest single-day protest in history and was certainly inspiring to attend, whether you made it all the way to Washington DC or marched in Lansing at our capital. But that one day alone did not change the world. The changes we have seen this past year – more women preparing to run for office, small advocacy and action groups forming in communities, the Me Too and Time's Up movements – these changes were brought about by small groups that worked tirelessly throughout the year. These changes are being brought about by living room meetings, coffee shop

conversations, and person-to-person relationships. The changes are slow, but they are happening. This weekend people are once again marching for women all across the country. It probably won't break any records, but it doesn't make it any less important or any less effective. This weekend we are marching as a reminder that we haven't left and that when we go back home, the work will continue, the relationships will deepen, and the movement towards justice will happen one changed person at a time. We cast our nets once a year knowing the rest of our time will be spent with a fishing pole.

Investing in quality is more work up front—it requires more vulnerability, more flexibility, and more commitment. The hardest thing might be putting aside our ego to let the numbers go when so many other times we are told that numbers are what matter the most. As Simon and Andrew demonstrate when they put aside their nets to follow Jesus, the payoff is a lot better. The payoff is not in numbers or material rewards, it is with a vibrant congregation, where people return from the shadows instead of slipping away into the cracks. It's about relationships that change lives and social justice movements that change systems and institutions. Christian ministry, the ministry we are all called to, is about creating moments of personal connection, and then savoring them. It's about investing in the quality of life in the people around you. It's about counting only as much as is necessary to stay balanced, and then...it's about casting aside your nets, following Jesus, and loving each other, one person at a time.

I encourage us to answer the call to discipleship by laying down our nets and picking up a fishing pole. Seek deeper relationships, more concentrated advocacy work, and richer experiences. Meet people where they are at, get to know the people that are sitting beside you or in front of you or behind you, and spread the ministry of Jesus Christ by helping one another to feel God's presence right here in our midst. For those of us who will march today, as we leave the march, think about what will carry us forward, and where we will concentrate our work in the

year ahead. There is a thrill that comes when you pull a net up from the water and it is full of fish. But there is a larger thrill that comes when you take the time to really connect with someone, knowing that because of this connection, neither of your lives will ever be the same again. Amen.