

Sermon Epiphany III 2024
January 21, 2024
Text: Mark 1:14-20

Mark and I have been really enjoying watching “The Chosen” and especially compelling was seeing the portrayal of our Gospel story today from Mark when Jesus calls Simon Peter and his brother Andrew to follow him and become fishers of men. Later on in the series we hear the two of them continuing to discuss this concept saying, “What does it mean to fish for people?” “I still don’t know.” I found myself contemplating how little they knew when they first said “Yes” to Jesus – how little they understood what discipleship would mean for their lives.

Last week during the sermon I invited us to say “yes” again to Jesus – whether for the first time or ten thousandth time. And this Sunday I’d like to invite you to contemplate the next step on your journey of following Jesus as a disciple. And I will remind all of us that like the first disciples, we too do not know all that God has in store for us when we say “yes” to Jesus’ invitation to follow him and fish for people. In fact, it reminds me of a conversation I had during my first pregnancy when I was wrestling with significant anxiety about becoming a mother. I asked a wiser, older mother, “What can I expect? What if I’m not ready?” She laughed and said warmly, “Of course you’re not ready. There is no way to be ready for motherhood – things will happen that you could never predict or prepare for – so just get used that idea now.” And then she assured, “But it’s okay – God will be with you.”

So it with saying yes to Jesus – of truly giving your life to Jesus. You can never be ready or fully prepared – and it’s okay because God is with you. But I dare say that we in our culture have forgotten how counter-cultural and risky it is or can be to follow Jesus and to be a Christian. A good example of that is demonstrated in the transformation over the years of the “fish” symbol used by Christians for centuries. It probably started after Jesus called fisherman to follow him but the fish symbol is called an “ichthus” in Greek, an acronym for, “Jesus Christ God’s Son Savior” (*Iēsous Khristos Theou Huios, Sōtēr*). Many of you may know the history of the early Christians in Greece and Rome when, under persecution they were forced to meet in secret and would scratch the ichthus fish symbol at places of Christian meetings, homes and places of and worship. At that time, to live as a Christian or to participate in Christian worship, was to risk your life, and so this was a secret symbol of the Church. This risk is still the case in some places in our world today, but its certainly not the case in the west anymore. But still the ichthus fish symbol lives on. Yet how very different the ichthus, this Jesus fish symbol, is for us today in America. In fact, you can see the ichthus everywhere: adorning car bumpers, in business ads in the yellow pages, on key chains, bracelets, websites, and even on email signatures. It carries no sense of risk in our culture, it has become commonplace, respectable, and even a means to get customers when used in advertising. As a complete reversal of the original ichthus, it has even become a source of humor in the ongoing bumper sticker dialogues containing the ichthus fish that you may have seen. First we had the ichthus fish with the Greek letters in it and then with the word “Jesus” inside the fish, later we saw a reaction to the ichthus fish with the word “Darwin” appearing inside it. In response to that came an ichthus with the word “truth” eating the “Darwin” fish. And the final rather humorous retaliation by the Darwinians was a dinosaur eating the “truth” that was eating the Darwin fish. We’ve also seen the “Evolve” fish with tiny feet and the “Gefilte” fish and even the “Fish and Chips” fish. As I was researching the ichthus bumper phenomenon, I came across a bumper sticker I liked best of all that reads: “Do you follow JESUS this closely?”

The point of course is that there is a wide discrepancy from then to now, at least in the west, about what it means to be a Christian – to be a disciple of Jesus. We Americans can easily forget the cost of discipleship and the label and badge of “Christian,” that, just like the symbol of the ichthus, no longer carries with it that sense of humility, sacrifice, suffering, and even danger itself.

So, what does it mean for us today when we call ourselves Christians or disciples of Jesus? What was it that Jesus called his followers to be and do when he invited them to become fishers of people? And what does it mean for us to say yes to that call now?

While I was living in Chiang Mai, Thailand as a missionary I encountered Christians who had fled from Burma because they were being persecuted so severely that their water sources and food had been cut off. I met Christians who had risked everything to smuggle Bibles into China at the risk of their livelihood and freedom. I met Christians that literally gave up everything they owned and knew in order to start a new life and follow Jesus. Their witness changed me and my concept of what it meant to be a Christian – a disciple and follower of Jesus. Then I returned to the United States and attended church for the first time after nearly a year overseas and I was asked to weigh in on an important decision that our youth adult group was going to make that day. I wondered all morning what the important decision was...given my recent context I imagined all kinds of serious issues. As the meeting started, I learned that the important decision was whether our young adult group was willing give up our current meeting space to the young families group because it was closer the Nursery. The discussion was heated and tense – and someone finally looked at me and said, “What do you think?” I said, “I don’t think it matters too much – why don’t we just swap rooms?” A few people shook their head and then the conversation continued as though I’d never spoken. I left church that day shaken and confused: was this what American Christianity was about? Were these the issues the Church thought to be so important? Important enough to fight over?” I actually that afternoon because I felt like my church had lost our direction and sense of what mattered as followers of Jesus. I wondered- did we even begin to grasp the sacrifice we had been called to make.

I was recently reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was a Lutheran pastor and part of the resistance against Hitler during Nazi Germany. He led a group of seminary of students illegally until the Gestapo shut it down in 1937 and then he joined the resistance movement by helping Jews escape Nazi oppression. He eventually took part in a plot to assassinate Hitler that failed and his resistance efforts were discovered, and he was sent to a concentration camp. Bonhoeffer was killed there in 1945, just a month before Germany’s surrender. But he wrote a book called “The Cost of Discipleship,” it’s a book I recommend because Bonhoeffer understood what it meant to follow in Jesus’s footsteps as his disciple. He knew that resisting Hitler and saving his Jewish brothers and sisters was his calling as a Christian. And he wrote this, *“When Christ calls a person, He bids them come and die.” “And if we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand? To answer this question we shall have to go to him, for only he knows the answer. Only (he) knows the journey’s end.”*

My friends, we don’t know where it may lead when we leave our nets behind and becomes Jesus’ disciples. But true discipleship will cost us more than the risk of displaying an ichthus on our cars or giving up our favorite meeting space. To truly follow *God’s* call can be costly, it can require sacrifices we never imagined would be asked of us and it isn’t something can fully prepare for, but we can trust that God will be with us in the midst of it. If anything is holding you back from whatever Jesus is leading you to as his disciple, remember what Bonhoeffer wrote this calling, *“...it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy.”* In other words, it’s worth it. Thanks be to God.