

And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

I’ve been waiting since last October 28th to talk with you about this story. It came up as my devotional text that morning. It’s never been one of my favorites. It’s always seemed to me a little like an evangelical altar call with all the emotional baggage that implies, and which, since I’ve spent most of my life working with young people, is too easy to turn into a raucous drama of leaving school and parents for a far more adventurous life with Jesus where they, not the adults, will be the ones in charge, “fishing” others from the error of their ways.

But that morning, the inner voice said, “Forget all that. Read this text in a non-literal way. Read it as if it were about Jesus calling you.”

So I took a few deep breaths, read the passage slowly, and closed my eyes.

And there was Jesus, gently untangling all the nets which ensnared me and asking me to step out of them. Come, he said. Let’s fish for people. Let’s find out what it means, not to be a woman struggling for recognition, but the human being you really are, and when we’ve found that, not just for you, but for them too, whatever they’re dealing with, there will be joy and the gates of hell will have nothing on us.

Suddenly the passage was not about conversion or fishing for men. It was all about becoming, not what the world wanted me to be, but what God wanted me to be.

That said, fishing is an apt metaphor for the journey with Jesus. If you've ever fished, you know that it takes a lot of patience. You have to position yourself just right and wait for the fish to come to you.

Jesus never compels a person to follow him. He calls and waits for your answer.

This is where the spiritual life differs most greatly from the temporal life. The temporal life is about decrees and expectations. It manipulates anxiety and passes out privilege and privation.

Jesus, on the other hand, seeks nothing but our genuine happiness and spiritual joy.

The temporal world calls nature "red in tooth and claw."

The spiritual world knows that nature is an ever-living world of transformation.

The temporal world calls us to a place of fear, clinging, and death.

The spiritual world reminds us that we have been alive since the beginning of time and it's not going to stop any time soon.

We call Jesus a king, but he was not raised to be a ruler. He did not have tutors to teach him statecraft and warfare. He did not apprentice to the powerful or suffer the childhood abuse that makes us tough. He lived most of his years in a "hidden

life,” as boy, adolescent, young man. He obeyed his parents. He worked as a carpenter. He learned to build things, and did the patient work of joining. He made friends, some of whom later became his disciples. He may have learned to fish or keep his neighbor’s flock. He heard the voice of God in the very ordinary liturgy of daily life. Rarely do we use the word “ordinary” to describe God, but that’s because we spend too much time seeking the extraordinary. Ordinary doesn’t mean dull. It means that things are in order, used, without being abused. Everything God creates is orderly. It’s not God’s fault we don’t get that.

Spiritual liberation is not something that can be acquired, writes Augustinian scholar Martin Laird. It can only be discovered. “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,” says God to Jeremiah, “and before you were born, I consecrated you.”

Sometimes, however, we can get so tangled up in the nets of fear and sorrow that God feels very far away. Then Jesus comes along one ordinary October morning and says, “Untangle yourself from your nets and follow me.”

Becoming a disciple of Jesus is not a career, it’s an act of patience and prayer. Jesus did not burst upon the scene with a mission statement or a strategic plan. He’s not a social entrepreneur. He doesn’t ask you to worship him. He asks you to blossom like the lilies of the field. He invites you to “Come and see.”

Nor did Jesus call strangers to walk with him, he called friends. He called people he knew. Peter and Andrew with whom he fished. Matthew, to whom he paid

his taxes. James and John, whose mother hung out with his mother. Judas, with whom he argued about politics.

He did not try to convert them to a new religion. He called them to rediscover the one they already had. Torah didn't need improvement, only a fresh look, which, by the way, is something at which Judaism excels. He did not set his group apart for a guaranteed place in heaven, no matter how much the mother of James and John pleaded with him to do so. He simply showed them how to live. He simply showed them the loving God who is always there. He gave them a glimpse of paradise and the joy which is the most remarkable effect of any real encounter with God.

He showed them, and this may be the hardest of his teachings for us to understand, that living simply makes one far happier than striving for glittering prizes.

And he showed us that not even crucifixion and cruelty can put an end to life and joy.

That is the real work of conversion. Conversion is the slow walk of a lifetime, turning to Jesus, stumbling, getting back up again, learning, being surprised, knowing love and sorrow, being completely confused, learning patience when I really want an instant resolution to the subject.

Though people think that today's gospel is a story of conversion, it's not. It's a story of call. It's an invitation, not an answer.

Call is where it begins.

Conversion is the lifetime which happens after that.

The Church calendar lists January 25 as “The Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul.” It should really be called “The Feast of His Call.” Paul was the first one Jesus called from the other side of the grave. Paul was a religious scholar, a pillar of his community, a person who thought he knew what things were about. He was passionate, articulate, and persuasive. And he hated Democrats. Excuse me, I meant to say he hated the followers of Jesus.

St. Paul’s experience has haunted Western Civilization ever since.

It is important to see “call” as one thing and “conversion” as another. The words are used so interchangeably that even I, who have studied this stuff for decades, slip into conflating them, but they are quite different.

Peter and Andrew were fishermen. Jesus called them while fishing.

Matthew was a tax collector. Jesus stopped by his tax booth.

Paul was an argumentative firebrand who thought he had all the answers. God called him with a ray of blinding light and reminded him you couldn’t get rid of Jesus by persecuting people who loved him. As one who believed in the power of force, Paul was thrown to the ground by the power of love.

God always calls us where we are, because God knows who we are.

(And by the way, contrary to the magnificent painting by Michelangelo which Mack shared in this week’s Grapevine, nothing in the Bible says anything about Paul riding a war horse or being muscular. Scholarly consensus is that he probably walked to Damascus as part of a caravan. Unlike the great zap from the heavenly host in the

painting, the light from heaven which blinded him seems not to have been noticed by anyone else in the group. The Bible only says, “The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.” Paul himself says in the Second Letter to the Corinthians that he wasn’t much to look at. In short, tradition has overdramatized this event greatly. I should know. I’m as much of an enthusiast as he was.)

Paul’s call may have been mystical, but to God, nothing is more ordinary than mysticism. Again, as Martin Laird says, “We are built for contemplation.” It’s easy to get blinded in the harsh light of a desert. It’s the work of discernment to see that blindness as a call from God. It’s one of the reasons Jesus chose Paul. Paul had much yet to learn, and like all of us, there was much he failed to learn but he came with a good pedigree in God recognition.

Still, hearing and discerning a call from God, even a dramatic one, does not render its recipient infallible. Infallibility is a weapon of the dictator, not a blessing from a God who values diversity, dialogue, and dynamism. Infallibility is the declaration that things will never change, as when Pope John Paul II invoked his infallibility to bar all further discussion about the ordination of women in the Catholic Church.

On a very personal note, it can be eerie to walk into a sanctuary full of people who believe I have no right to exist.

Meanwhile, the greatest gift that God gave to human beings is our ability to change. To imagine, to create communities, to ponder the nature of reality, to make art, to grow without ceasing.

We stand at a very important moment in our shared history.

When Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people,” it was not about catching them, but setting them free. Amen.