

Not Just Another Fish Story

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Mark 1.14-20

My great-aunt Gladys and my grandmother went on a fishing vacation. Hiking through the woods toward a stream with their fishing gear in hand, they came across what appeared to be an abandoned mine shaft...a big, dark pit really. My grandmother was claustrophobic, so my great-aunt couldn't persuade her to go into the pit. But they did want to know how deep it was, so they tossed a pebble in; they never heard it hit bottom. Then they threw in a bigger rock, still no sound. Finally, they found a log, and they struggled to lift the log and toss it into the bottomless pit. Soon after they tossed the log in, a goat out of nowhere came running by them and jumped into the hole! A few minutes later a man came along and asked my grandmother and great-aunt if they had seen his goat. Aunt Gladys said, "Well, sir, a goat did just rush run by us and jumped into this deep pit." The man said, "Oh, that couldn't have been my goat; my goat was tied to a log."

Our gospel lesson today is another short passage, but in that short passage there are important points to be made. I want to look at three points from the gospel lesson that can be of benefit to us in our lives today.

1. When we change our attitudes, we see new possibilities.

Mark tells us that after John the Baptizer had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee sharing good news about God's love, saying, "The kin-dom of God, the Blessed Community is here; repent and believe in this good news."

Repentance isn't beating ourselves up. It isn't begging an angry deity to overlook our wretchedness and withhold wrath that we deserve simply because we are so innately vile. That doesn't sound like good news at all! Repentance is just making a change, and change is necessary for growth, for success, even for survival.

Charles Darwin taught us that "it is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change."

Repentance is just a change of mind, change of attitude, change of perception. It is the change that makes miracles possible. Repentance is getting unstuck...releasing the past to the past, forgiving ourselves of our mistakes, and forgiving others who have wronged us. It's choosing to know we are not limited by our past, or by our parents, or by what others have said about us. It's embracing the new idea, the new hope, the new opportunity. Turning away from what was keeping us down or holding us back and toward what can give us hope or joy or peace...that is repentance. Ernest Holmes said, "Change your thinking,[and you'll] change your life!"

Mark is writing during a time of crisis. Jerusalem has been sacked and the Temple has been demolished and he knows that if during such times of difficulty we aren't careful, we'll start to define ourselves by our pain. We'll get so stuck in the crisis that we forget how to transcend pain, how to transform it, how to be stretched by it and how to heal from it. Yes, be honest about the difficulty but also be hopeful about moving beyond it. Don't get stuck...Repent...adapt...change your mind and believe in good news! Even when the fit hits the shan...dare to see possibilities and believe in good news. When we change our attitudes, we see new possibilities.

2. The second point I want to raise this morning is simply this: Religion is our tool; we are not its' prisoner!

Jesus makes that very point later in Mark's gospel when his critics accuse him of breaking religious law by doing good work on the Sabbath. Jesus' response to them is simply, "The Sabbath was made for us; we weren't made for the Sabbath" (Mark 2.27).

In today's lesson, Jesus sees Simon and Andrew fishing and he says, "come with me and I'll make you fish for people." That is probably more than just an acknowledgment of their fishing profession. You see, in the bible that Jesus would have known, and presumably Simon and Andrew too, fishing for people is a negative image.

You'll recall Jonah who is called to Ninevah. He doesn't want to go to Ninevah, the capital of the Assyrian empire which has oppressed his people. Those people are his enemies. And Jonah is called to minister to his enemies...in his mind, he believes that means he is to foretell their destruction, but in the end, they are not destroyed and Jonah admits that he had always suspected God would prove to be kind to those horrible Assyrians after all. And God was.

Well, Ninevah is named for Nine - the Assyrian fish god. And when Jonah tries to get out of going to Fish City to minister to his enemies, he winds up being taken there anyway...and how...In the belly of a fish! Jonah is the one fished for...he is caught...not in a net by people fishing but actually by a fish. To fish for a person in Jonah's case means forcing him to confront his prejudices; and whereas that may be a good thing in the end, it was not a pleasant thing for Jonah.

The prophet Amos, a crazy shepherd who comes down from a mountain top, challenges every nation he can think of (including his own), tells one group that as a result of their injustices they will one day be carried away by fish-hooks (Amos 4.2).

And Jeremiah imagines God sending hunters and fishers to catch corrupt people to bring them to judgment (Jeremiah 16.16). Fishing for people is not a joyous image in the bible.

And yet, Mark's Jesus reinterprets it. For Mark, who lives in a community that is sustained by the fishing trade, fishing is a sign of nurturing, of feeding, of people working together for the common good, of getting people involved, of braving the storms of life in order to bring in the catch that will help the whole community. Mark doesn't view people as fish to be hooked...tormented...abused...he views people as fish to be gathered gently in a net, embraced, and becoming part of a life-giving matrix of relationships. He has taken an old image from his own religious tradition and redefined and reapplied it. He isn't a prisoner of the religious status quo; religion is his to use, and he is free to use it in more nurturing, healing ways than it has been previously used.

3. Finally: Religion at its' best is more relational than regulatory.

Down the road a bit, Jesus sees James and John fishing and he calls to them and they leave their father Zebedee and join Jesus' growing band of disciples.

Jesus, it would seem, needs people. Today he is calling out to Simon, Andrew, James, and John. In chapter 2 he'll recruit Levi. In chapter 3 he appoints the 12 as apostles and in chapter 6 he sends his disciples out to do what he has been doing. Jesus is not a solo act.

Mark's Jesus is showing us that God needs us. The church isn't a creed or a hierarchy, the church is the Blessed community, a matrix of relationships, a group of living, loving, learning people. Without our talents, our prayers, our goodwill, our presence, our generosity...there is no church.

If we look at our story today as an allegory, then the Sea of Galilee becomes the energy of life, the life-force, the spirit of Jesus' movement, which is human cooperation...it is at the Sea of Galilee that he calls his first disciples. He can't do it alone, he needs help, he needs relationships. He needs collaboration. And when he gets it, the church is energized.

But let's not forget about Zebedee. He's also part of this transformational energy at the Sea of Galilee. His name means, "God has given." In relationship, in community, through our giving, God gives. God shares through our sharing. So as Zebedee shares his sons...he certainly needed

their help with his business, but he doesn't make a fuss. He lets them go, and through his giving, God gives. God is able to use Zebedee's gifts to bless people Zebedee will never even meet.

Not only does Zebedee give up two of his faithful workers to now be workers in Jesus' mission, but he gives even more of himself. He stays behind to continue the work of fishing. Someone has to mend the nets. Someone has to catch the fish. Someone has to take the fish to market. Someone has to have fish to shares with those who don't have fish. Zebedee is doing his part...and his part may seem less glamorous than the others, but it is equally important; in fact, his part makes it possible for others to do their part.

In our story today, some go out with Jesus into the limelight, some stay put to keep the home fires burning and to help resource the movement, but everyone has something to do and when everyone does what he or she can, choosing to share the work and the responsibility - the good news of God's all-inclusive love is advanced. Jesus can't do it alone; he needs people; he depends on the power of relational living. When such relational living takes place, miracles seem to happen.

When we change our attitudes we see new possibilities.

Religion is our tool; we are not its' prisoner.

And religion, at its best, is relational rather than regulatory. This is the good news! Amen.

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I am willing to do my part.
I give my best, and I receive God's best.
I give thanks for the Blessed Community.
And I embrace the wonderful possibilities in life.
And so it is!

"In my life there is an infinite supply of love, it is inexhaustible, I can never use it all in this lifetime; so I don't have to be sparing with it." Louise Hay