

SERMON for Sunday, January 22, 2006
Mark 1:14-20

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D is for Disciple

A simple alphabet game: as I was packing for a trip, I put in my suitcase something beginning with A – apple, or a B – bandana, all the way to x – a xylophone, y – a yak, and z – a zebra. D – D is for disciple. And is for dodging, delaying, dirty, determined, dangerous, discovering, demanding. Today's gospel lesson is about becoming a disciple, and all that it may mean for your life.

Fishing was the work they knew, Simon and Andrew and James and John. It was hard work, hauling huge nets up over the side of the boat without the aid of motor-driven winches, backbreaking work in the hot, hot sun, muscle-straining work pulling the oars through the high waves of a stormy sea. But it was work passed down from father to son, work that was a common and familiar occupation along the Sea of Galilee, work that was honest and straightforward. It was work that provided food for families and villages, that provided an income and gave purpose to every day. So why leave the familiar for the unknown? Why walk away from that which is sure to follow a dream? Why risk security? Why indeed?

I know that I have told you about the daughter of a friend of mine who hesitatingly went off to her first day of kindergarten. My friend was waiting at the corner when the bus dropped Mandy off at the end of the morning, and as they were walking up the street toward home, asked, "How was it?" to which Mandy replied, "OK. But you don't have to sign me up for first grade." All the anticipation of following her brother and sister to school, all the excitement built up over the summer, the new backpack, the new clothes, the new crayons and paper and bottle of Elmer's glue, lost their edge in the reality of the day. And our experiences in faith might well be just like Mandy's was on the first day of kindergarten.

Back to this gospel for today, back to the call to be a disciple. What would these disciples face? Discouragement, first of all. Followed closely by disappointment. Most of us like to see and feel and touch the results of our work. We like to see paper and text shoot out of the printer, a perfect loaf of bread come out of the oven, a patient cured of disease, budget figures of income and expense a tidy balance, boxes of products to count and cartons of inventory neatly shelved. Certainly at the end of the day those who were fishermen knew just what the day had produced. Either the nets were full and there would not only be plenty to eat but also enough to sell, or the catch would be minimal or none at all, and food and income would have to be found elsewhere. When you answer Jesus' call to be a disciple all guarantees fly out the window. Jesus told Simon and Andrew, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Now what kind of invitation is that? Far more elusive than fish, that's for sure.

Every one of you who has ever served as a Sunday School teacher must wonder, on the mornings when kids are dozing, or throwing popcorn, or paying more attention to each other than to you, you must wonder what value it all has, why you spend Saturday nights preparing and every Sunday in class. Do the students learn anything? And you may never know. I don't know if Mrs. Deremer, tall and upright with her long hair neatly coiled around her head, ever knew that her fourth grade girls, including me, did indeed learn the Scriptures under her tutelage, and to this

day thank her for insisting we memorize, and memorize, and memorize. Thanks to her, the words of the psalmist rise up from deep inside, for inspiration and comfort and solace. And I don't know if Mrs. Choborda, who tried desperately to have the Junior Choir robes stay white and unwrinkled, who made a valiant effort to have us sit in the choir without whispering and giggling, ever knew that her young singers, including me, would grow up to a life of singing praise to God.

And discipleship can be disappointing when the money you give to help someone you know is spent on fast food rather than a few days of nourishing vegetables, or gas money goes for beer. And when all the dreams you've dreamt for a community youth center dissipate in the dysfunction of a board of directors and a cut in the United Way budget. And when the efforts of people of good will don't seem to make a difference in moving even one inch closer to peace. We know the frustrations of prayers seemingly not answered, people saying no to our invitation to join us, shortfalls in budgets, graffiti on the sidewalk and walls. You probably have seen on a poster the prophetic words, "I'd rather be fishing." I wonder if those disciples who answered Jesus' call ever felt that way.

What about the work that disciples do? It is dirty work, for one thing. The nets that these fishermen were using were not little hand-held ones, scooping up a fish that is caught at the end of the line. The nets were big and heavy, to haul them up full of fish called for muscles and grit. And when the nets were pulled up, if they were full, they included not just the choice, large, and preferred fish, but all the stuff of the sea. And I think about that image as we are called by Jesus to be fishers of people. The message we proclaim isn't for just the choice ones we might choose, but for everyone and everything together in this great big net we call God's creation, all of our brothers and sisters in this world we call home. Some disciples seem to understand.

A number of years ago I had the pleasure and good fortune to meet a woman named Maggie Kuhn, a petite, white-haired, peppery woman filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit, a determined sense of rightness and righteousness, and an energy and zeal worthy of a person half her seventy-plus years. She had been a Christian activist for years, working for fairness and dignity for all. Maggie was the founder of the Gray Panthers in the early 1970's, working to create a social climate and institutions that would help those over sixty-five in a meaningful and productive retirement. If she were alive now, she would be fighting about Medicare and Medicaid and Plan D. She died at the age of 90, and I have a biography that was written a couple of years before she died, No Stone Unturned, which might well be subtitled, "No Person Unmet". In describing her work with the YWCA and the USO during World War II, aiding the many women defense workers who lived near their work in crowded housing that often was little more than a shed, she wrote, "We were a mediating and humanizing force in situations that were horrific, providing a crucial sense of stability in communities where everyday life was turned upside down..." About her work with women whose husbands were killed at Pearl Harbor, she wrote, "Many are in desperate need of friendship, sympathy, jobs, personal counseling, help with family problems." Maggie was committed to being a disciple of Christ, showing with her own life how God's people can live in and shape the society in which we live. She lived in a time when life was turned upside down by war, and yet she lived as a peacemaker. She lived denied advancements and fair treatment in her workworld because of prejudice toward women, yet she lived a leader of justice for women and men. She lived in her later years in a frail body, yet became a might spiritual leader. She commented, "Books on peace of mind may be best-sellers, but the American public

needs a lot of disturbing. Instead of avoiding all the world's problems or being overcome by them, I like to see them as an invitation." Maggie wasn't afraid of a full net of all kinds of fish.

And so to answer the call to be a disciple is disappointing, discouraging, dirty, and what else? Demanding and maybe dangerous, and a lot of other words, some beginning with the letter D. So why do it? In the very short passage of the reading from Mark today is the sum and substance of it all: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." We answer the call to be disciples not because we are lured by the rewards, but because we have good news to tell. In a Biblical drama, playwright P.W. Turner, in describing the history of the people as told in the Old Testament, calls it "All the tangled tale of the people of God..." and then he continues, "From the promise made to Abraham under a starlit heaven, through the whole of Old Testament history, down to the hope of a Savior. So we come to the hinge-point of human history. The Son, who was from the beginning with God, the Word spoken at creation, became human...And the word became flesh and dwelt among us." In Christ the kingdom of God has come, and we have no choice but to share it, to tell it. In Christ our lives are turned around by forgiveness, our relationships are changed by reconciliation, our days are given shape and form by service, our death is undone by eternal life.

The brilliant and genius Albert Schweitzer, who was born in 1875 and died in 1965, had a dazzling career that ranged from theology to the arts. At the age of twenty-six he wrote a book on Jesus and the Bible that shook the theological establishment of the late nineteenth century to its core. He became one of the greatest organists of his time and wrote a definitive volume on Bach. Multi-talented, he had many career choices he could make, from settling into a comfortable position on a theological faculty in a lovely part of south Germany to becoming a master organist in all of Europe. But instead he chose to go back to school and study medicine, and then go to a remote place in French Equatorial Africa called Lambarene and live out his life offering free medical treatment to the poor. Schweitzer wrote about his risky decision to follow Jesus: "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side. He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou Me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is."

D is for disciples who follow Jesus, who dare to embody the gospel for the life of the world. Amen.