

For a Change

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Matthew 4:12-23

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Matthew 4:12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. ²³Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.



A leopard can't change its spots.
A tiger can't change its stripes.
An old dog can't learn new tricks.
The more things change, the more they stay the same.
Unless you are the lead dog, the view never changes
You don't want to change horses in midstream.

How many clichés are there about change? Are they true?

I read a NY Times article that explained that scientists have “discovered a shape-changing fish that can detect the presence of

hungry predators and then turn itself from easy pickings into something much more difficult to swallow.”

These are fish in the goldfish and carp family that, when a carp-eating pike gets in their pond, they begin to get bulkier and taller so that the pike can't get its mouth open wide enough to eat the carp.

I'm planning on getting in on this deal. If I can create a donut that does the same thing, imagine what that would mean for the diet market? I could make a bundle!

So, fish can change. But can people?

Matthew tells us that Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee when he came across two fishermen brothers, Simon and Andrew. At Jesus' invitation, “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” Then they found John and James, the sons of Zebedee, who were mending their nets. He called them and “immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.”

Living in the Time of Jesus, a recent documentary on the National Geographic Channel, discussed various aspects of what Israel was like during the time of Jesus, particularly The Galilee where Jesus and his disciples focused most of their ministry. It looked at archaeology and science and anthropology and other recent research.

One of the things the show explored was the occupation of fisherman in The Galilee. They looked closely at an excavated fishing village and were surprised at what they could deduce from what they found. It's been pretty well-known that fishing was hard work in 1st Century Israel – as commercial fishing is today even. In villages on the Sea of Galilee fish was perhaps the primary staple of a family's diet. You either fished for your own survival or, if you had another occupation, you bought fish from those who made a living catching fish. Fish were hauled into boats by use of

a net cast over the side of the boat. The program even put the host into the boat of a contemporary fisherman who uses the same basic method for fishing today albeit with a motorboat and other technological advances.

The excavated village they have been studying, though, also revealed that some fishermen were making a pretty good living at it. They've discovered what could best be described as fish factories – large buildings where fish catches could be sorted and cleaned and prepared for sale at market where individual families would buy their daily fish or even restaurateurs would buy what they needed to feed their customers. A typical home for the average fisherman and his family was probably a one room dwelling yet they have also dug up larger places where they discovered an abundance of fish bones and pottery and assorted Roman coins – eating establishments – restaurants of a sort. And one place they found, a multi-room residential building, had a substantial area beneath the surface which archeologists have identified as a wine cellar.

These restaurant owners, the fish factory managers, the fisherman with the protected and well-stocked wine collection. These people were what we might call the middle class. There was no middle class, of course, not as we understand that term – there were only rich and poor people and rarely did one climb from poverty to wealth. But there was, perhaps, beginning to emerge a merchant class – people who didn't have to engage in back-breaking labor and who could make a living off serving others needs.

Where do our fishermen fit – Simon and Andrew and James and John? I know I've always thought of fishermen as being dirt poor. And probably they were. The owner of the fish factory might have been among the elite in the community, but the families who stocked the factory and who cast their nets not just to feed their families but to supply the market were barely eking out a living. But they were doing it. They weren't starving.

In Capernaum, one of these fishing villages along the Sea, archeologists have identified a house that they believe was Peter's home, a residence not far from the local synagogue that early on became a focus of the earliest Jesus followers after his death. And this house was substantial, not huge by any means – not like a Chester County MacMansion – but large enough to remind us that fishing was a sufficient enough way to feed your family and make a living. And remember what Matthew tells us, James and John are working with their father, Zebedee (which means “Thunder”) mending nets – this was a family business – large enough to support at least three grown men and their families.

These guys are making it in a world where many people were not. And here comes Jesus, making his way through the villages, teaching stuff that made some people laugh at him, made others wonder about their belief systems, made some take notice and offended others, even made some people think that he had “gone out of his mind” (Mark 3:21) leading his family to try and restrain him. Still others thought he was being blasphemous and turning people away from God.

Jesus comes to these hard-working fishermen and they dropped everything. They “changed.” They put down their nets, they walked away from their boats, gave up what was feeding their families, no doubt faced public ridicule and the possibility of being shunned by their families and friends. Imagine doing that.

Two pairs of brothers, attending to what is required of the average fishermen, are invited by Jesus – and the text does not indicate whether they had ever heard of him or met him before – to discontinue what they are doing and pursue another totally different life course. The invitation is bold, “Follow me,” yet the response is equally if not even more bold – immediately they left their nets, their boats and families – their lives – and “followed him.”

"Fish stories" often raise more questions than they answer and send us to a place that we would not otherwise readily imagine. Yet one of the questions that this Matthew text raises is a little different. Are we human beings willing to change? Or maybe "how do we as human beings change"? (Frederick J. Streets, "A Fish Story")

Imagine being so committed to something that you give up your comfy office and computer and cell phone and change your life path. Imagine giving in to the urge that I suspect tugs at each of us, that urge to want to find out what all this God-stuff is about. That's what, writes Matthew, Simon and Andrew and James and John did. They walked away from all that and walked toward something even more significant.

"Change, of any sort, requires courage," reads a plaque hanging near my front door at home reminding me every day that what God calls me to in my life will require change and that change will require courage on my part.

God's call to us requires change. If we aren't open to change – if we are resistant to change – if we are insistent that what we have is enough and that change is unnecessary then we will never grow. Look at what these four – and others that decided to follow – got out of their willingness to change. They met people who they would most likely never have encountered in their isolated fishing village existence – tax collectors, lepers, demon-possessed folk, the unclean and unwanted and unnoticed in society. By following Jesus they were brought into a new understanding of who God loves – everyone – and who God hates – no one. They were invited to reconsider everything that they had ever been taught about the reign of God versus the reign of the oppressive political empire that dominated every little detail of their lives. They were led to places where their families would probably never have let them go otherwise – they encountered Gentiles and the sick and prostitutes and politicians and children, they met rich and poor, clean and unclean – up close and personal.

And they began to learn. They learned who their neighbor is, they learned that the tiniest amount of faith is enough to move mountains and change the world. They learned that God could be demanding but also loving, that God can be insistent yet also forgiving, that God can be provocative yet also patient. They had to change to be able to do that because what Jesus called them to was nothing like anything they had probably ever known before.

The fish that can change its size to avoid being eaten led its researchers to observe this:

Plasticity (the ability to change) is the only way for an organism to adapt to a rapidly changing environment within its life span....This opens up the door for more careful examination of plasticity in vertebrates. People are going to have to stop thinking that there's not going to be this kind of change during an individual's lifetime.

Change is the only way these fish survive. So also is it the only way for followers of Jesus to survive as well.

And if we don't change?

The light turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection. The tailgating woman was furious and honked her horn, screaming in frustration, as she missed her chance to get through the intersection, dropping her cell phone and makeup. As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects. He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Choose Life' license plate holder, the 'Follow Me to Sunday-School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk, so naturally...I assumed you had stolen the car."

I've read that humans are motivated to change by things like fear and discomfort and desire and attraction. We can be motivated to change something about ourselves or our lives by the fear that if we don't change, the quality of our life will be significantly diminished or threatened in some way. Many of us have heard of people who changed their lifestyle in some manner in order to live a more meaningful life. We can be motivated to change because we feel a sense of discomfort with some aspect of our lives. Our discomfort with something has reached the point that causes us to act. We can be motivated to change by a desire for, or a strong attraction to, a new way of life.

Each of these – fear, discomfort, desire and attractiveness – can be used also as a defense against changing. The idea of change can be too frightening for some of us or more uncomfortable than our discomfort; or our current desires, attachments and attractions can be too strong to be superseded by new ones. The paradox of these defenses is that the fear of change causes us to think we will lose more than we will gain, even though what we have is so unsatisfactory.

So a prerequisite for change is an awareness of what it is that we fear, feel uncomfortable about, or desire and are attracted to. Maybe the time that Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John spent with Jesus in the early stages of their relationship was a time when

they became aware of their fears, discomforts, desires, and attractions. In those teaching moments maybe Jesus awoke in them a new and different desire and attraction that became for them a new path of life.

“Change of this kind,” writes one writer commenting about change in the call of the disciples, “transforms one's core identity or enables one to discover and act out of a greater sense of self. It is like polishing a precious piece of metal in order to remove the layers of dirt that hide its true identity, brilliance and worth. So much can hide our beauty and calling from ourselves and others.” (Frederick J. Streets, “A Fish Story”)

The disciples called by Jesus had to change to be able to follow and no doubt they changed even more once they followed. So also must we be ready to change if we are to be followers of that very same Jesus.

Those clichés are simply not true when it comes to following God's call.

Maybe a leopard can't change its spots and a tiger its stripes, maybe an old dog can't learn new tricks, but we human beings who claim to be Jesus followers simply must change horses in midstream.

Change, of any sort, requires courage. Be of good courage (Psalm 27). Follow.

Amen.