

“Fishing for People”

There’s a book that I hadn’t looked at in many years, but had the occasion to seek it out this week. The book has the title, *“Rethinking Evangelism: A Theological Approach.”* The author, Ben Campbell Johnson, is a Presbyterian pastor and Professor, so I entered the book somewhat guardedly, looking for the Reformed (that is, non-Lutheran) biases.

For example, he insists that there is no “invisible church,” just the one we see on earth, warts and all. Luther argued to contrary: Since the Church is defined by what it does (“preaches the Word purely and administers the Sacraments rightly”) not by what it is, that function is visible; but we cannot see into the hearts of those who have gathered, and we certainly can no longer see those who have died in the faith who properly make up the Body of Christ.

Such biases aside, I found the book somewhat helpful. But I was mostly drawn to its title, because over the past few weeks, as I have grappled with today’s Gospel, I have been rethinking evangelism.

There are probably hundreds of books, and scores of programs, that have been designed and promulgated to encourage and foster evangelism in local congregations. Decades ago, D. James Kennedy’s Evangelism Explosion was all the rage, a method of contact that involved asking the right leading questions. “Power Evangelism” is a form of confrontational evangelism that is designed as a kind of “bulldog” approach: Get your teeth into the person and don’t let go. Over the decades, our own church body has come up with “Winsome Witness,” “Each One Reach One,” and, most recently, “Ablaze!”

As I considered the words of Jesus to Peter and Andrew (and by inference to James and John as well), I had some disturbing? (no, that’s not the right word . . .)vacillating thoughts.

Jesus said to them: ***“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”*** I had to go over those word very carefully and examine what Jesus was

ordering? inviting? (surely it is more than suggesting) them to do.

“Follow me” — Δεῦτε ὀπίσω μου (deute opiso mou). Literally it is translated *“Come behind or after me.”* To me that is clearly invitational. The word δεῦτε is an imperative, so one could say it has the force of a command. When Matthew writes that the four of them did indeed drop what they were doing and followed Jesus, he uses the far more common Greek verb ἀκολουθέω (akolouthéo) — but that word is used in the New Testament primarily as a term for “becoming a disciple.” So, the invitation to come after Jesus becomes the commitment to become His disciple. This tells me that no invitation that involves Jesus can be anything but serious, serious business.

What do these two meanings tell us about us? First, it tells me that confrontational evangelism is simply not Jesus’ style. Jesus’ style was more invitational: Check out Zacchaeus sitting in the sycamore tree where Jesus literally invites Himself to Zacchaeus’ home (Luke 19). He beckons Matthew (Levi) to follow (Mark 2). Two blind men without any invitation or command just start to follow Him. (Matthew 9)

Repeatedly, the Gospel writers tell us of crowds that followed Jesus — the same word ἀκολουθέω is used. There was something about Jesus that drew people to Him. In some cases it was an action — a healing, a restoration of some kind. In some cases it was His words (although people seemed to have been astonished at His words, amazed at their power — but once over the shock, that can have a drawing power). But I am increasingly convinced that it was Jesus’ *persona* that drew people toward Him — something of the grace that emanating from Him that told people it was okay to step in.

Do we, as a congregation, emanate that kind of grace? Is that something either you got it or you don’t? Can it be learned? Can it be generated somehow? I think we can learn to express such grace that there is an allure to those who desperately need grace.

Professor Campbell writes, *“The church as the bearer of Christ’s*

presence extends the incarnation and continues the ministry of Christ on earth. This corporate fellowship of believers re-presents Christ to the world. The church speaks the word of Christ. The church reconciles. The church seeks the lost. The church heals the broken. The church seeks peace on earth and goodwill among all persons. The ministries that Christ began when he was among us in the flesh, the church continues. These acts of compassion concretize the presence of Christ, making it visible and tangible.” (77)

We need to grow in our understanding of this as who we are and what we do. The church too often reflects not Christ, but a gathering of like-minded people who come together (when it suits them) to engage in some rather odd and bizarre behaviors. You and I are the image of Christ here in this place. We are to shine forth with all the grace and peace that people long to see in Christ. In His invitation to these fisherman, Jesus beckoned them; He did not challenge them.

“ . . . I will make you fish . . . ” Again the Greek [ποιήσω ὑμᾶς ἀλιεῖς (poieso humas alieis)] literally translated: *“I will make you fishermen.”* The word “make” here is ποιεω (poieo), which translates variously as “make,” “do,” “become,” “cause to be” (it is one of the most commonly used words in the Greek language).

Matthew had told us just before this that they were **“casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen.”** This tells us something about what it meant back then to be an ἀλιεὺς — it involved net casting. Do we have a number of avid fishermen in our midst? That fishing likely involves rod and reel, with maybe a small net at the very end to lift the fish safely into the boat or onto the pier.

Fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were trawlers; they would cast their nets from the boat or from the shore and drag toward them whatever fish could be caught therein. It is an indiscriminate way to catch fish; whatever winds up in the net winds up in the boat, to be sorted out later, if necessary. There is yet another way to fish that involves dynamite, but it is not regarded as a valid way to bring in the catch of the day.

Now what this tells me about the call to these men suggests that personal evangelism is not the style to which Jesus was inviting their commitment. I am not aware of any account in the Gospels of the disciples witnessing to and winning any individual. They were at one point commanded to go from town to town and ***“Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’”*** (Luke 10: 8-9) They were announce the Kingdom and, in that sense, they were to be the embodiment of that kingdom’s entrance to that place. They are amazed at the results, saying on their return from this mission trip: ***“Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!”*** (How many demons have submitted to you?)

But there is another accent we can place on Jesus telling them He will have them become fishers of people. Jesus tells them they will have as their catch ἀνθρώποι (anthropoi) — literally in Greek “men” but in the common usage today “people.” What we have here is a form of Jewish parallelism; you are now fishermen (men who fish for fish); I will make you menfishers (men who fish for men). It is a play on words; but it suggests something to me about what Christ is telling us.

Fishing was what Andrew, Simon, James and John did for a living; it was their occupation, their lifestyle. Jesus is, in a sense, telling them, *“I’m going to take what you know and where you live, and show you how to reshape that to use it as a way to draw people to me.”*

For many of us, the bulk of our time is spent at our occupations. Eight (if you’re lucky) hours and day, five (again if you’re lucky) days a week, that’s where you invest your time, energy, thoughts, values, and ideas. It is also, more than likely, where you encounter the most people — people on whom you can have an impact with your faith. For those who are retired, or do not work outside the home, except for extended periods of weather like what we experience in this environment, daily you do encounter people: at the store, the post office, the doctor’s office, the movie theater, and myriad other places.

We need to begin to see those venues as places where shoals of fish are swimming and cast our nets. How do you cast your net? You invite people to come to some event at church. Maybe a dinner, a special worship service (like Christmas Eve when the weather allows), a game night, a special concert at a venue other than our building.

Or (and here's a dangerous idea): offer to be a friend. Help getting the groceries into the car; offer to keep an eye on their property when they go away for the weekend; bring over a crockpot of stew one evening when you learn that they've been hit with the flu.

Who? If you are sufficiently bold, total strangers does work. But most of us are not that bold; so look for people you know (or at least would like to know).

Two things have to be in play here. 1) There must be an earnest comprehension that people who do not have a faith relationship with Christ are lost. 2) If you don't believe that, or don't care, then it doesn't really matter what you do or don't do. (It does matter, but if you don't believe this or don't care there will be no impetus to do anything). You must be convinced that here at St. Thomas is a place where people can genuinely encounter Christ and be edified in the Gospel. If those two things are in place, then you have the proper nets to begin to trawl as peoplefishers.

But be forewarned. [As we prayed together earlier] Fishing is difficult work. The hands of fishermen are calloused from years of trimming nets. The backs of fishermen are bowed from the heavy weight of net and fish. The eyes of fishermen are heavy—weighed down by many sleepless nights. Fishing is backbreaking, smelly, soggy work.

Even so, Lord, make us fishers of people.

Amen.