

Third Sunday After Epiphany
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
21 January 2018

Mark 1:14-20

One of my favorite scenes in the book and play *Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo is the moment when young Marius meets Cosette for the first time. It was a brief encounter that transformed the young revolutionary forever. This is the way he describes the encounter to his friends a bit later:

“Had you seen her today,
You might know how it feels
To be struck to the bone
In a moment of breathless delight!
Had you been there today
You might also have known
How your world may be changed
In just one burst of light!
And what was right seems wrong
And what was wrong seems right!”

This powerful sentiment is exactly what we see in the Gospel of Mark today. We see four seasoned fishermen leave everything behind to follow an itinerant Rabbi. This is a culture where most people don't travel for more than a few miles, it is the duty of adult sons to care for their elders, and it falls on sons to follow the family's traditions and care for the family's business. Yet, one brief interaction with Jesus and the disciples's lives changed forever. I have always found these passages very intriguing and I wish the Evangelist would tell us more. Did these men know Jesus before today? Could they have been childhood friends? After all, Jesus grew up in this area. Could Jesus have discussed his plans of becoming an itinerant preacher prior to this event? The truth is that we will never know.

Now, let us speak for a few minutes about the context of this passage. Mark tells us that “after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.” Jesus' proclamation of the Good News starts with an arrest which will lead to the death of John the Baptist and ends with his own arrest and Crucifixion several years later. In a way, Mark is telling us that persecution, torture and death are often the very context in which the proclamation of the Good News must take place. Yet, the proclamation of God's truth is “Good News”. Even when it leads to physical death, it is “Good News”. And the good news is none other than the fact that “God's Kingdom is here”, “God is near”, God is not an abstract concept to study and analyze, but rather a reality that has become incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God becomes one of us, God has come to where we are, God breaks into our lives. He is not out there somewhere, waiting to be found by us, but near us, here with us, here in us.

Mark tells us that Christ **came, saw, and invited** his disciples. He came to Simon and his brother Andrew and later to James and his brother John as they were fishing. Christ encountered them in the midst of their daily life. He doesn't hide and wait to be found, but rather, he comes to us where we are. He breaks into our lives daily and calls us as we go about our business. As we practice medicine or law, as we build or sell things, as we teach or learn. Christ meets us where we are. Many of us spend a great deal of time and money looking for God, but today we are told he is also looking for us and he finds us where we are to offer us his kingdom. The only possible response to this Kingdom of love coming to us is repentance and acceptance of God's son. The only response is to believe and to accept the God who now dwells with humanity.

Now, let us look more closely at the call of these fishermen in Galilee. Jesus "saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea-- for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.'" We are told that they left "their" boat and followed him. Let me say a few things about fishing for people. We have often understood this phrase in an evangelistic way. We fish for people when we bring souls to Christ. Even though this true, we can not forget a basic truth: When fish are taken out of their natural habitat, and taken to dry land, they die. In a way Jesus is telling his disciples that their job is to help people die to their old selves, die to their old lives, die to their old ways of doing things. Because only when we die to our old selves can we rise again to a new life in Christ. Only when we let ourselves be caught up in Jesus' net, and trust in him completely, can we experience transformation, new birth, and new life in Christ.

We are told in the Gospel that these four disciples left their boat and their father to follow Jesus. The fact that Peter and Simon had their own boat and the fact that father of James and John had workers tell us that these were well-established fishermen. They were not destitute. They were well-to-do by the day's standards. So, when they leave everything to follow Jesus they leave the certainty of their life. The life of a fisherman had an order, a routine to it. As long as they did what they needed to do the workers could expect a return, a certain profit and a unique lifestyle. And yet, they leave this certainty to follow a mysterious preacher and an uncertain future. They die to their old lives and ways of doing things in hope of new life. There was something compelling about this Jesus of Nazareth. When he spoke to them he spoke to their deepest needs and wants, he spoke to their inner most hopes and dreams, he looked deeply into their hearts and souls. They felt as though he knew them, really knew them. They felt struck as with a thunder bolt. And at that very instant they felt that their lives would never be the same. They would risk it all to follow Jesus.

When I compare Jesus's call of his disciples with the common way in which Rabbi's obtained disciples I see some differences that I believe are important. Rabbi's did not go out looking for disciples. In fact, disciples would come looking for Rabbi's and would often be denied acceptance by one Rabbi and would have to go to another Rabbi. Here we see that Jesus comes to his disciples and chooses them. He will remind them of this right before he is betrayed. he tells them, "You did not choose me, but I chose you". The second difference here is that when a disciple comes to a Rabbi, they settle on a determined term and price. In a way, the student knows when he will graduate from the very moment he starts his education with a Rabbi. We

don't see a term placed by Jesus on the formation of his disciples. In fact, it is assumed that they will follow him for the rest of their lives. Even within a context of persecution and death. Even when betrayed, incarcerated, punished, tortured, and killed. This is a different type of call because this is a different Rabbi.

Now what does this Gospel tell us today? First, accepting Christ's call requires that we make a conscious decision to repent and to die to our old selves. Only in dying can we find life in Jesus. Second, accepting Jesus requires radical obedience. It requires trust. It requires a willingness to leave everything behind and follow where the Lord will lead us. Third, following Jesus requires accepting sacrifice, even if this sacrifice takes the form of incarceration or death. But, my brothers and sisters, once you have fallen in love with Jesus of Nazareth, once you have been caught up in his net, once you have allowed him to disrupt your life, you will never be the same. Only he can give us the meaning, joy, and purpose our lives need.

But I don't mean to imply that following Jesus is just a painful and sacrificial life. It is also a life of joy and freedom. For me the joy came when I realized that there was nothing I needed to be and nothing I needed to do to deserve his love and his redemption. Once I was able to get off that treadmill of merit, I found true freedom to be whom God created me to be. The treadmill of merit tells us that God will only love us if we do a list of chores, if we are perfect in our intentions, fully engaged in our devotion, completely committed to our piety, and dedicated to good works every day of our lives. God will only love us if we actively participate in the work of our salvation. This is the big lie of Christian moralism. The plain truth is that God loves us as we are. His son died for us while we were still sinners. There is nothing that can separate us from his love and his compassion for us in Christ Jesus, Our Lord.

Being a Christian is difficult business, but once Christ looks into your eyes and into your heart, you realize all at once that you are loved, that you are accepted, that you are God's child... and you also realize that you would do anything for this Jesus of Nazareth. Once he looks into your eyes, you begin to realize what true joy means and you begin to live a life of service and compassion in perfect freedom, not because you must, but because you find joy in loving others as Christ has loved you.

I pray that you will fall in love with Jesus of Nazareth all over again today because life without Christ is no life at all. Amen!