

Rev. Lisa Schrott
February 12, 2023
Matthew 4:18-22
Mending the Nets

Last week Rebekah shared from the Gospel of John some of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. This morning I'd like to share from the Gospel of Matthew. After Jesus was baptized by John and spent time in the wilderness preparing himself for ministry, he traveled back to Galilee. He made his home in Capernaum by the sea. We pick up the story as Jesus calls the first disciples. Hear now these words from Matthew chapter 4.

As Jesus 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 fishers. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed Jesus. **This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

You can imagine the scene in your mind – you can smell the salty air and lingering odor of fish. You can feel the wind blowing the water and sand around; hear the calls of the birds and the workers shouting greetings to each other; the background chatter of daily weather updates and health reports. I imagine it be mid-morning, the sun just high enough in the sky to warm the skin. An ordinary day, with ordinary people, doing their ordinary tasks. And Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee and that ordinary day, that ordinary life, was no more.

I invite you to think back on those days in your life when the world around you changed - the birth of a child, a diagnosis, an unexpected death, a job offer, a college acceptance. Or this week when some of you heard that you or your child or your grandchild might be in danger at school. Or maybe it was a time when you had a new found understanding of God's grace, experienced the peace of Christ that surpasses all understanding, the realization that God's love and embrace, God's promise of salvation was meant for you. It is that kind of day for the disciples, a life turning upside down kind of day.

The calling of the disciples is one of a handful of stories that is found in all four gospels. It frames the ministry of Jesus – that while Jesus as the son of God came to bring the kingdom of God – to teach and heal, to free us from the weight of sin, to restore us to right relationship with God – Jesus called partners in ministry. He called men and women to put aside the priorities the world says to value – to leave their nets – and to work toward the Kingdom of God. To follow one who preached a radical welcome of inclusion to the great banquet, who overturned social norms of the day, to follow one who said to love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you. To leave your nets behind and follow Jesus.

The Greek verb translated as “left their nets” has a deep and rich context. It is more than just a casual dropping of the net, it is a verb of release – of leaving behind the old ways in which one lived and embracing a new life. When Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, what we now know as the Lord’s Prayer, in chapter 6 of Matthew¹, the word is translated as “forgive” - “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Forgive your nets and follow Jesus. Be forgiven of all that holds you back from following Jesus.

In the Sermon on the Mount, this word is used for the sacrificial act of giving - if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well. Give up that which keeps you warm and secure and follow Jesus. It is used to describe Jesus’ last breath - a release from his earthly role to his new heavenly role; a release which then calls us to become his body here on earth.²

This act of release and liberation - of leaving your nets behind to follow Jesus - often gets the most attention in this passage, rightly so. You can imagine the drama of the scene. As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And as important and compelling as the narrative of Simon Peter and Andrew is, this morning, I also want us to consider the overlooked of Zebedee brothers, James and John.

James and John were sitting in their boat with their dad mending their nets. I imagine them hunched over, carefully examining the nets for even the smallest hole and tear that would allow a fish to escape without them noticing. Painstakingly stitching together gaps, weaving new threads and strands into places that had grown weak from overuse or disintegrating from lack of use. I imagine them bringing back to life and usefulness nets that otherwise might have been discarded.

And Jesus calls James and John to follow him. Jesus calls James and John to use those skills of mending nets in the ministry of the kingdom of God. To examine their society and to look for holes and tears that allow people to escape from community without anyone noticing – the ones with no homes or jobs or undesirable jobs; the ones with diseases and addictions and past histories that allow them to float through the holes in the nets of our society without us realizing it.

Jesus calls James and John to use those skills of mending nets in the ministry of the kingdom of God to painstakingly stitch back together, to weave threads and strands into relationships that have become tattered and torn, stressed and strained. To bear witness to the life-giving power of not discarding people – family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues – even when the fabric of connectivity seems threadbare.

¹ Matthew 6:12

² Matthew 5:40; Matthew 27:50

Jesus calls James and John to use those skills of mending nets in the ministry of the kingdom of God to bring back to life and usefulness all the things that are too easily discarded when anger and hurt and pride get the better of us – to bring back to life civility, integrity, respect, graciousness, our common identity as children of God, all created in God’s image.

Jesus calls James and John to bring their net-mending skills to the political and religious turmoil and upheaval that characterized first century Palestine, a place not that much different than our world today. Tumult and turmoil that caused estrangements between neighbors and family, that made shooting the breeze with your fellow fishermen so tense that you stopped even greeting them lest you get pulled into “one of those conversations.” Tumult and turmoil that made you seek out those who looked like you and spoke like you and thought like you and “liked” the same posts and comments and tweets. Yes - Jesus calls James and John to bring their net-mending skills to the tumult and turmoil of first century Palestine so that the kingdom of God can be realized. And Jesus calls each one of us to follow him and use our own net-mending skills in this world and in our relationships with each other.

This call to net-mending was brought home to me in a story in *Presbyterians Today* by Donna Frischknecht Jackson³. She writes about the growing interest – one may say trend - in “mending” or “darning.” It is a trend brought on by a growing concern for the environment – of the waste of throwing away clothing that can take many years to decompose in landfills. In the article Ms. Jackson writes that she “mused about what kind of “holy thread” would be needed by a society torn apart by politics ... What thread would we need to spiritually stitch us back together: perhaps a thread woven with fibers of grace, compassion, empathy and listening?”

She continues, “I then thought about the extra buttons my grandmother always had on hand. They were kept in a cookie tin that always disappointed me when, as a young girl in search of a cookie, I would be greeted by buttons instead. But when my rag doll lost a button eye, I was so happy when my grandmother took out that tin and found a replacement. I wasn’t ready to throw my doll away. Yet how many times have I been quick to toss aside a person because I didn’t have a tin full of extra love and patience to mend what was torn between us?”

Indeed. A tin full of buttons and some sacred thread is what we need today. We need a tin full of buttons and some sacred thread to repair the wounds of our children and youth who reel from threats of violence in places that should be safe places of learning and growing. We need a tin full of buttons and some sacred thread to mend the anxiety and fears of parents and grandparents and caregivers who worry about their children going to school and not coming back home; and for parents and families of people of color, especially black men, we need sacred thread and a tin full buttons to mend the gaping holes in our society that have led to an epidemic of police brutality.

³ Donna Frischknecht Jackson. Spiritually Stitching What is Torn. *Presbyterians Today* January 11, 2021. Available online at <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/pt-0121-editor/>

There are so many holes and threadbare places in our world that need mending. And Jesus calls each one of us to this work. This morning we are ordaining and installing a new class of elders and deacons – we are laying hands on them and asking the Holy Spirit to direct their hearts and actions. The installation prayer ends by asking God to pour out the Holy Spirit on all of us here in this place and to equip us for the ministry to which we are called. This morning we will also hear a moment of gratitude for the work that you all do – every member of this congregation – in the ministry of Christ. And we will celebrate that work with a “Thank You” cake at fellowship time. And we do celebrate the gifts we have all shared, even as we recognize there is more mending to do.

This past Wednesday night, a group gathered here to pray and reflect and share how gun violence and threats of gun violence have affected us as individuals and as a community. It was a powerful and grace-filled time, and I am grateful to Rebekah for suggesting we do this and organizing the service. The service was a reminder that community matters. Jesus could have done his work by himself. But instead he called a group to minister with him – he called disciples to walk by his side and teach and heal. Jesus recognized that ushering in the kingdom of God is best done as a collective, as a people.

This week, Anglican priest Tish Harrison Warren penned a column for the NY Times titled *The Temptations of the ‘Personal Brand.’* She says, in part, “A pastor, and a church, is not a brand. A key part of religious communities is that they are not merely a spectacle or a show but are primarily a people, a community living life together. ... A pastor and the work of local churches more broadly are tethered to a place, an institution and a particular people, with all the complexity, hilarity, struggle and mystery of their lives.”⁴ Amen. Jesus recognized that and called Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John and so many other into a community living life together. The apostle Paul did the same as he built communities of faith throughout the Mediterranean region. We are a bottom up faith – groups of people gathering together to worship and pray and sing and celebrate and learn and mourn and support each other through the joys and challenges of life. And groups of people who gather together to attempt to mend the tattered nets of the world.

Jesus calls us to use our skills of mending nets to stitch up the holes and tears that our actions and inactions have contributed to; to restore and reimagine the frayed and threadbare places in our society, making them stronger and more vibrant than they ever were before. Jesus calls us to replace the lost buttons, broken zippers, and falling hems in our relationships with others. Friends, this is kingdom work – the hard work of restoration, of living in light and hope, and extending love and grace. James and John were mending their nets when Jesus summoned them to follow him. They left their nets and were never the same. Let it be for each one of us. Join me in prayer.

⁴Tish Harrison Warren. *The Temptations of the ‘Personal Brand.’* *The New York Times* Jan. 29, 2023. Online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/29/opinion/social-media-personal-branding.html>