

Fishing for People
A Sermon on Mark 1:14-20 by the Rev. Philip Major
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I can never decide which of the four Gospels is my favorite. The images in the Gospel of John are so beautiful; Jesus is the vine, we are the branches. Luke is powerful because of the many stories where Jesus is taking apart the barriers that separate people into tribes. Matthew surpasses the other accounts in the clarity of Jesus' call for us to seek and serve Christ in all people.

This year, in 2024, we will be immersed in Mark's Gospel. Today's passage illustrates the power of Mark. Jesus is walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, which is a lake a bit smaller than Oneida Lake. As he is walking along he sees two men. Two brothers, Peter and Andrew, are throwing a net into the water to catch fish. With no words of introduction, Jesus calls out to them, *“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”*

In the Gospel of Mark, this will become a central theme. Follow Jesus and give more of your attention to the people. Matthew and Luke include similar passages, but in Mark, the episode is made more powerful by its simplicity, and by the fact that it is one of the first events. Mark's story is sparse and uncluttered.

In the first thirteen verses, we were introduced to John the Baptist, then John baptized Jesus, and then Jesus spent 40 days and nights in the wilderness. In verse fourteen, *after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee*, and began to preach. *As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon Peter 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.”*

The story is so simple. The message is direct and powerful. Follow Jesus and give your attention to the people who are all around you.

This will be the main storyline for much of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus and his closest disciples will be constantly walking through the countryside and the cities. Everywhere they go Jesus will pay attention to the people. As a result, they are always surrounded by a crowd of people, curious and hungry for good news. Jesus will pay attention to the people who are being ignored by the religious and political leaders. Jesus will feed people who are hungry and heal people who are sick. The work Jesus will do will be so powerful it will be described as miraculous. But one of the most important parts of Jesus' work is simple and not at all mysterious. The first, and most important thing Jesus is doing, is just paying attention to the people.

This is the heart of the Good News in Mark's Gospel. No matter whatever else is happening, Jesus is giving his attention to the people who need it most. Jesus cares about them, and they know it.

In this brief but spectacular passage, Jesus calls Peter and Andrew, James and John to follow him and give their full attention to the people and especially to the people who need it most. Their task was not complicated: just take care of the people. In your brief but spectacular life, Jesus calls you to follow God's way and give your full attention to the people, and especially to the people who need it most. God has given you a great gift: a heap of grace, forgiveness, and love. Your task is not complicated: just take care of the people by sharing a

small portion of the grace God has given you. This is the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

I had been thinking about our Gospel passage from Mark for a few days when I came across an article in the New York Times. It was an opinion piece written by a Jewish Rabbi. The ideas were related to what we find in today's Gospel passage.

In her article, Rabbi Sharon Brous explains an ancient religious ritual. The ancient ceremony is described in the Mishnah, which is a collection of instructions and wisdom written and collected by rabbis two hundred years after Jesus' time. This particular ceremony happened during a pilgrimage festival, when Jews from far and wide would gather in Jerusalem.

All of the people would climb the steps that led up to the Temple Mount, which was a large flat plaza in Jerusalem. At the top of the steps, most people would turn to the right and begin to walk counterclockwise in a large circle around the edge of the plaza. But some people would climb to the top of the steps and then turn left, walking in a clockwise direction.

The people who turned left, who walked against the flow of the crowd, were people who were grieving in some way. Some were grieving the death of a child, or a husband, or a wife. Some were grieving for other reasons. They came face to face with members of their community, who would ask, "Why do you go round to the left?" They might say, "I am grieving the death of my child." The ones who came from the other direction would offer a blessing, "May the One who dwells in this house comfort you." This series of confessions and blessings would continue as thousands of people made the circuit around the perimeter of the Temple Mount.

These confessions and blessings were not only for the grieving. They were also for those who had broken the rules. According to the Mishnah, a person who was excommunicated was to walk to the left. Those who came from the right would ask them, "Why do you go round to the left?" They might say, "I broke the rules. They will not let me enter the synagogue." The ones who came from the other direction were instructed to offer a blessing, "May the One who dwells in this house inspire them to draw you near again."

The title of Rabbi Brous' article expresses the main idea, *Train Yourself to Always Show Up*. Train yourself to always show up because none of us can carry the weight of life on our own. Train yourself to always show up because there will come a day when something you say or do brings hope and strength to someone who is grieving, lonely, or excluded. Train yourself to always show up because there will come a day when you are grieving, lonely, or excluded and you will need the support of other members of your community.

The rabbis say, 'train yourself to always show up.' A Jewish man named Jesus said to Peter and Andrew, 'follow me and I will make you fish for people'. They are approaching a single destination from different directions.

The destination is a place where people pay attention to what is happening in the lives of other people. The task is for people to put aside some of our self-centeredness long enough to listen to the person who is exhausted, grieving, or hungry. The purpose is for each one of us to share a small piece of the tremendous grace we have received from God. This is the blessing of being a follower of the one who gave everything he had for the sake of the people. This is the blessing of being a community of people who show up for one another.