

January 21, 2034 Epiphany: The Rev Kate Kinney

So how many of you like to go fishing? How many of you fish for relaxation? Or as your occupation?

I grew up on Lake Erie and fishing boats were part of the scenery. My late husband grew up in Nantucket and each year he would visit his family, go out on a small boat, and bring home fish for all his friends and family. That was his favorite part, bringing home fish, having folks over and having long, lazy dinners talking about this or that but mostly solidifying old and new relationships over a good meal. A meal given by the sea. Yet, in the gospel story, fishing was more than a fun pastime.

I once visited a professional fisherman in Maine who gained his livelihood through fishing. I spent several days with him and his family and the whole family was involved in the industry. It was hard work and often very iffy if they would make it financially. It is a great challenge to be a fisherperson.

Jesus grew up around fishermen and stories in the gospel talk about him going out in boats or sharing fish dinners. Fishermen were folks that he loved. It was so much a part of his environment and culture. So, it is natural that he would find his followers among the local fisherfolk. So why would these working-class men and their families be attracted to what Jesus had to say? Why, if they had a good job and a family, would they leave all? Or at a minimum, spend time with a man who would not help them financially? And why would they do it, as Mark states, "immediately." Mark uses the word "immediately" 41 times in his short gospel. So powerful action was required.

Fishing was a major industry in first century Israel. And it was often too much for one family. The brothers Simon and Andrew worked with their father, Jonah. And James and John worked with their father, Zebedee. It is highly likely that these two families bonded together and had day laborers to help. These bonded family groups were contracted to provide fish for

larger groups in return for payment in cash. Yet first century records show that fishermen were rarely compensated fairly and often their payment was irregular.

And fishing was part of the tax network. Toll collectors leased fishing rights to what today would be the equivalent of a corporation, in return for a percentage of the catch, sometimes up to 40%. So, what was the gamble for these first followers of Jesus? Certainly, they were looking for a better life. And one free from Roman occupation.

As they went on the road to follow Jesus, Jonah and Zebedee would have to hire more day laborers. Life was hard and the families may have decided to throw in their lot with Jesus because he offered some hope. Against the oppressive realities of their daily lives, Jesus talked about the good news and the kingdom of God.

George Lamsa, who was an Aramaic scholar, says that the Aramaic word *sayade* means hunters, but it also means fishermen. So, when Jesus says I will make you fish for people it means to attract people by a new way of thinking where God's love, not corporate greed, would be the binding force in the community. And this transformation will occur through speech and teaching. The enemies of Jesus often tried to catch or hunt him down through speech. They hunted up words and then asked him questions that they thought he could not answer.

So, when Jesus takes on disciples, he is training them in a new way of thought. He is training them to read the scriptures, to understand that the time is to be fulfilled when there will be a liberation from the old ways and that God is with them. The disciples were to catch new disciples not through revenge, not through violence, not through anger, but through speech. And immediately. And they were to follow Jesus without baggage; they just bring themselves.

And, as we know, these humble fishermen and their followers would soon testify before the high priests and kings. Their words of the good news of God's love will transform world history.

And it is risky business to follow Jesus, the opening of this morning's passage is, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God." Jesus and John were mates. They were bonded. And so, after John's arrest, Jesus takes his place. That took guts.

This morning's gospel is Jesus' inaugural address. Here it is: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." Don't you wish that our politicians would be as succinct as Jesus! The kingdom of God is a radical change to the power and authority of the religious and political leaders. Jesus and his disciples will be walking on rocky ground. And sometimes on windy water.

And here is the major question. What is the kingdom of God? Though out the ages we Christians have dipped the phrase with saccharine. Be nice, sweet, don't rock the boat. But that is not what Jesus meant. The kingdom of God is transformative.

The Episcopal theologian Marcus Borg stated that in the 1st century, the kingdom of God means:

- 1) The kingdom of God is not about life after death but about life in this world. He is not refuting life after death, but it is not what Jesus was talking about.
- 2) The kingdom of God was both a political and religious metaphor in the first century. The kingdom of God would be about a kingdom different from that of Herod and the kingdom of Rome. It is about what life on earth would be like if God were king and the rulers of this earth were not.
- 3) It is about transformation of not only our individual lives but that of the earth itself. It is God's dream and passion. It is a world of peace.

- 4) It is a world where war, famine, poverty, and premature death are abolished. It is a world where every family has its own vine and fig tree. It is a world where the powerful will no longer make those working for a living afraid for their livelihood.
- 5) This is the very heart of the gospel. And sometimes we need to repent, or turn around, if we are on the wrong path. We journey back to God from a place of exile. We commit ourselves to the good news of Jesus.

The word "follow" was used 3 times in this short passage. Following Jesus is about creating the kingdom of God. This is the invitation that was given to the first disciples, and it is given to us.

So today each one of us is asked to transform. And it may sound so difficult in a world that is tormented with wars on two fronts, famine, extreme weather, and political debates that make the heart sick. Even the pope used the word "genocide" in the Middle East a few weeks ago. But if we are disciples our response must be immediate. How? Discipleship comes in our everyday lives. The choices that we make about stewardship of the earth, about writing our politicians when people are abused, about finding out where our food, our fish, is harvested and how the workers are paid, about making sure that our children and grandchildren have an education where truth is honored, the list is endless. About honoring mystery in our lives and not being afraid to walk without all the answers. This is the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and if we are his disciples, well, we have put our feet on the path.

Perhaps you followed the story about a mother and her children who drowned last week in Texas because the state and federal government fought over whether they could save her and her family because they were illegal immigrants. They were in the water trying to touch dry land

and no one helped them. It must be clear to us that we, as followers of Jesus, must work for change. And immediately.

And then there is hope. I read an article in the New York Times this week about fishing for scallops when the scallops are nearly all dead around Shelter Island, Long Island. Yet, some fishermen, who are hard workers, who pull up each catch by hand, stated that they are not giving up. One named, Mike Tehan, got up early and set out in his boat. He stated, "I didn't come out here with big plans to get rich today," he said. "You can't say it's depressing because you already know. But you hope."

I believe that the followers of Jesus, got up immediately and followed him because they had hope. His voice was of change, persistence, and love. And Jesus saw them, invited them because he too had hope and saw that a small band could help create the kingdom of God. May it be so with us. Amen.