

What Choice? (Mark 1:14-20)

Jesus is walking down the beach. He sees some men fishing. As far as we know he has never met any of them before. They are strangers to him. He calls out over the water, "Come, follow me and I will make you fish for people." Without a word they leave their nets as if they were disposable diapers and follow. Two more, down the beach get the same call. They step out of the boat and leave behind not only their possessions, but their father as well. They just throw him and the whole business away to follow a man they've never met. How do you explain that kind of radical sacrifice and decision? But then, it is possible that this was not the first time they had met. Jesus might have been friends with Peter and Andrew, James and John for some time. He may have talked with them, shared his hopes and dreams over breakfast and visited with them in their homes. His command that day on the sandy shore of the Sea of Galilee may have been the culmination of a long conversation. It may have been their moment of decision. Follow me, I will make you fishers of men.

There is another possibility. We believe that God's powerful word caused light to shine out of darkness and order to come forth from chaos. God's call in Christ Jesus—can it not make men and women into disciples? By the time we, or anyone, decides to follow Jesus, God's call has already created faith in our hearts, to say yes, to leave our nets behind. To be with Christ the Lord.

Many Christians can look back at a time in their lives when they made a decision to be Christ's disciple. For some the choice was dramatic and memorable. They can mark it on their calendars and celebrate it year after year. For others the decision was little more than a ripple on the pond of faith. They have lived in a family who worships regularly, for whom Christ and the church are very important. They never knew anything but faith. They knew they loved Jesus long before they were confirmed. Still, when we sing the song, "I have decided to follow Jesus," we believe that the choice was ours to make, and that, we might, just maybe, have chosen a different path. Some even pride themselves on that choice. It is a sacrifice they make, and it separates them from the uncommitted. "The world behind me, the cross before me". The world behind them, including any who do not travel with them. But what does Jesus say about all this? He flatly rejects our pride. (John 15:16). "You did not choose me, but I chose you." The prophet Jeremiah has written about his decision to be a prophet. Look it up in the Old Testament. You'll find it there in the first chapter of Jeremiah. Notice, though, that it doesn't sound like much of a choice. "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'" What kind of a decision is it, what choice, if before we are even born, God has chosen us to serve?

Sometimes we make a choice, but it really isn't much of a choice at all. Fishing was enough to put food on Peter's table, but he was not likely to become rich. Do you ever wonder if he cast an envious eye at those rich tax collectors, maybe felt a twinge of inferiority, maybe asked himself, "What am I doing

wrong?” Couldn't he have become a tax collector if he had wanted, and shared their station in life? He had a choice! But what would the choice to become a tax collector mean? It would mean that Peter would have to cheat people; he would have to help and assist the people he hated most in their oppression of his people; he would have to become the very kind of person he most hated. When that twinge of envy came, that feeling of dissatisfaction, he bided his time, and it passed. The wealth he might have had, the power, the position, the prestige he might have gained were not worth sacrificing what was truly dear to him. Yes, he made a choice, and yet the other option was really never an option for him. When Christ came on the beach, all that Jesus stood for, all that he promised may have been the true hope that Peter had always searched for. He had the choice to follow another leader, or no leader at all. He could worship another God; but no other leader, no other God evoked in him the worship of his heart. What choice did he have?

God's power overcomes all our choosing, until what we choose is that choice which he set out for us before we first saw the light of day. Saul was satisfied with the life he was living. He felt good about the way he was protecting God from blasphemy. Christians were being imprisoned, and he felt good about it. Riding to Damascus a light knocked him off his donkey. God spoke to him. He was blind for days. The Holy Spirit healed his blindness. His eyes were opened. The Holy Spirit changed his heart, and he followed Jesus, with a vengeance. What choice did he have? In many ways, when we choose, we don't. Jesus is speaking truth. "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

Even so, when we decide to follow Jesus, we usually have a pretty clear idea what we are deciding to do. The disciples thought they knew why they were following Jesus and what they had to gain. They had an agenda. Somehow, they would be free, finally, from the oppressive rule of Rome. Instead Jesus would bring in his Kingdom. When he did they hoped to rule with him, on the right and on the left. If they gave up houses and wealth and everything to follow, it was not for nothing. They had an agenda in their hearts. Jesus had an agenda, too. "I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." In a world where kingdoms were built on the power of force, Jesus had a different idea—a kingdom build on the power of the Holy Spirit, where hearts were won by the incredible love of God, caught like fish in a net.

Fishing for men and women. What a strange kind of thing to be about doing. In fact, I always found that a frightening idea, from the first time I read about it in Sunday School. Quite frankly the idea depressed me. Shy people like I was would much rather add up numbers as part of a middle management team, take home a paycheck and leave the human relations work to others. Fishing for men and smacked of high pressure salesmanship. The prospect of trying to get people to leave everything behind to follow Jesus did not sound like an easy sell. I was not sure I wanted to do it myself. Besides working with people can be so messy. They can hurt your feelings in a minute. They can reject you, they can make fun of you. And you can do the same to them. Say something wrong. Forget something. Make a mistake and all of a sudden they won't forgive, even when you muster up the courage to go to them with your heart in your hand.

Fish for men and women. I didn't know. What would all that involve? Was I really cut out for that? I didn't want to try to give people what God said they needed. I wanted to give them what they knew they wanted and needed. Cars, soap powder, roofs over their heads. I didn't realize how many people had all of those things, and far more, but did not have a sustaining presence of God's forgiving and sustaining love in their lives. I didn't really understand how vacant lives are when they are filled with everything else, but God's gracious love is nowhere to be found. It is always there, but they do not feel it or know it as a foundation for living.

I think that Simon Peter and the others tried in every way to make their agenda happen. They begged Jesus to call down fire on some Samaritans that had rejected their preaching, only to have Jesus turn a deaf ear to their complaint and then tell them a story about how a Samaritan man was the only one to come to the help of a foolish Jewish robbery victim. Peter expressed horror that Jesus was going to die, only to have Christ call him Satan. But then one day Jesus sent out seventy disciples with power to heal. When they came back they were amazed that even demons obeyed them and their hearts rejoiced. When grieving widows, and hated lepers, when shunned prostitutes and tax collectors came to Jesus and went away with tears of joy, I believe his disciple began to realize that all the things that they thought would meet their own needs and the needs of others couldn't even begin to scratch the surface. Catching men and women does not trap them. It brings them home and sets them free.

So what does it mean to follow Jesus? Look at the lives of those who were his first disciples! What does it mean? It means being asked to do the impossible, like feed five thousand people. And when you raise the objection that your whole year's salary would not be enough to buy bread, you are met with stern command. "You give them something to eat!" My home town minister, who passed away two years ago, was once in charge of feeding people at the New Wilmington Missionary Conference. Fifty or a hundred extra people showed up, unregistered and unannounced. When he asked Ed Fairman, the director, what he should do, the reply came back, "Jesus fed five thousand people. Figure it out!" Being a disciple meant denying Christ three times, and being forgiven. It meant watching the one you loved shamed and humiliated and crucified on a cross. It meant becoming so discouraged and disheartened that you threw in the towel and went back to fishing. And then a woman comes and tells you news that you won't believe, but finally you do, that what you thought was utter defeat is God's surprising victory. It meant a lifetime of mistakes and a lifetime of learning and the wonder of seeing God work in ways you never imagined possible. It meant understanding that there is nothing that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus the Lord. "Now we see as in a glass darkly," says Paul, "But then face to face."

Tradition tells us that Peter, too, was condemned to be crucified for his faith. Because he did not feel himself worthy to die as his Lord had, and he asked his captors to crucify him upside down. Maybe at the end, he looked over his life. Maybe he remembered that moment when Christ came walking down the beach calling, "Follow me." He may have remembered how in an incredible,

radical burst he left everything. As we look at his life through the eyes of Mark's gospel, it is clear that all that Peter became was the work of Jesus Christ in his life. At the time, Simon Peter may have thought he was making a choice. But as he looked back on his life he saw that God had chosen him long before. Yes, it was a choice, but what choice? Gripped by God's powerful call, surrounded by Christ's love, what choice did he have? What choice have we?