



“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.

Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

No negotiations. No discussion about what the salary, the benefits or other perks would be. No discussion about an office or support staff. They immediately left their nets and followed him. Something was so compelling about Jesus and his invitation that Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John simply dropped what they were doing and followed Jesus.

And the four disciples became 12. The 12 became 70. The 70 became hundreds, and then thousands, and then millions. Even to us. Even to now. Even to this place.

Whether you like it or not, you are an evangelist simply by being present today. By your presence, you proclaim the good news of God in Christ. Evangelism is not only the street corner preacher. Evangelism is not only the pastor preaching from this lectern.

Evangelism is about witnessing to the love of God in your life through how you live your life. “Actions speak louder than words.” Or the reverse: “do as I say not as I do” – even with that caveat, we really look at someone’s actions rather than their words when we hear this because of the disconnect between saying and doing. Doing is what shows us the true heart and the true values of someone.

On January 18th, we hosted a “thank you” lunch for our local police and dispatchers. After the lunch here, we took the leftovers to the police station so that those who could not attend would still have an opportunity to share in a lunch – part of our gratitude for the work that these first responders do. No explicit mention of Jesus Christ. No attempt to get someone to come to St. John’s. Rather a witness to the love of God through action. Thank you for what you do. Thank you for putting your life on the line so that we may live in a community that is generally safe. Thank you for your ministry even as you may not call it that. Know that St. John’s is a place that welcomes all for who you are and wherever you may be in your journey of faith and of life.

A few minutes ago we renewed our Baptismal Covenant. It is an important reminder to each of us of what we have committed to. It is also important to remember that we do what we have promised “with God’s help.” We gather together, we share the bread and wine, we proclaim by word and example the Good News, we seek and serve Christ in all persons and we strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of all persons – with God’s help. None of this is doable without God’s help. We need each other to hold us accountable. We need God’s guidance to help us when the way is muddy and unclear. We need God’s grace when we disagree. “We will, with God’s help.”

None of us needs to walk alone. We are a community that seeks to serve and love God – meaning each and every person here and those not here as well. Our Baptismal Covenant gives us a blueprint for a life which loves and honors God. It offers us a Passover from death into life. Baptism is our sacrament of resurrection into a life of witness, a life of service, a commitment to justice and peace. This is not something we do alone, however. Living a life faithful to our Baptismal Covenant requires each and every one of us, working and praying together. It means we remember that we do what we do “with God’s help.”

We do not need to fear disagreements when we work from the presumption that we are each living our life based upon the love of God shown in Christ. That does not mean we always agree even within this parish or within the Diocese of the wider church. We each are called to love God as we understand God, and our life experiences will shape how that happens and the details. That *should* shape how we express our disagreements and how we learn to live together with those disagreements. Brene Brown writes that we need both faith and reason. Faith does not mean that we have all the answers but rather it provides us with a framework within which we go forward when we are uncertain or fearful. Faith helps us move together rather than moving apart.¹

As one of the Tuesday Morning Bible Study participants said, quoting another pastor: “we need to turn our mess into our message.” Hopefully St. John’s is a place where we can bring our messes and learn how to turn them into our message. A place of hope. A place of redemption and forgiveness. A place of transformation.

One of the beauties of Education for Ministry is that it gathers a group of at least 6 persons together to read and study the word of God in years one and two. We come from different backgrounds and understandings of what scripture is and how we respond to it. We learn from each other. The word of God becomes alive when we engage with it through reading and discussion. It influences how we live and how we respond to others in our life. It offers a safe space to grow in the love of God even as we ask the hard questions about who God is and what does God want from me and what is my place and my role at St. John’s.

Paul challenges the church at Corinth to be wary of charismatic leaders. He urges them to follow Christ and not the leader of the day. He reminds them that when we focus on the person rather than the message of love, grace and forgiveness, the cross becomes foolishness. The cross is meaningless when following a person rather than focusing on the Gospel. Be wary of becoming too attached to your leadership. Look through the leadership to the values expressed and the actions taken. This is one important reason why leadership should be “for a time” or “for a season.” Each leader has strengths and challenges. Staying too long in one specific leadership position has the tendency to create a situation where newcomers may not feel welcome because “we’ve always done it this way.” New leadership can offer the chance to evaluate the way we’ve always done it and to see if perhaps another way might be life giving as well. At the same time, continuing leadership can bring stability in times of chaos.

For each of us in leadership positions, this time of year is an opportunity to challenge ourselves with how we lead and how we might improve. For example, my challenge for 2014 is to become better about delegating. Yes, it’s often true that doing it myself is quicker and the work gets done the way I want it to be done. But the way I want it to be done is not the only way something can be done. Sometimes the way someone else does it might actually be better. Imagine that!

¹ Brene Brown. [The Gifts of Imperfection](#) (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010), 90.

Secondly, doing things myself means leadership is not shared. This is part of the trap that I believe Paul was warning the church at Corinth about. The church is not me or any one of us. It is all of us together. Ignoring the gifts and talents of others may result in people leaving because they do not feel valued or needed. The truth is everyone is needed to be the best and the most that we are called to be: to be fishers of people. Everyone has gifts that can be offered up to make St. John's an even better witness to the love of God in Christ.

Evangelism is a hard word for Episcopalians to hear and to get their minds and bodies around. We are too often wary of the street corner preacher or the person who gets in our face about "have we been saved?" or how our beliefs may not be "right." And so we simply dismiss what that person may be saying because it is uncomfortable for us.

Sandy Sasso in her book Midrash², quotes Amos Oz about fundamentalists as being persons who live their faith with exclamation points and Oz saying he wants to live his faith with questions. That's right in line with an Episcopal point of view. We regard the questions as at least as important as the answers and often more important, especially when the questions enable us to come together and seek wisdom together. Living a life that values questions is not always easy and it certainly does not always lead to the same answer. We need to learn to lean into differing answers and not shy away from them. We need to learn to lean into our own and other's messes and see how they might be transformed into a message of love and grace, redemption and forgiveness.

The church is first and foremost about genuine, authentic and meaningful relationships, according to Parker Palmer.³ Parker used the example of a Mobius strip to help us envision a life that is constantly moving and the inside becomes the outside and the outside becomes the inside. It is all one strip regardless of where you put your finger on it.

It is a symbol for infinity, for transformation and for recycling.⁴ It might also be an image for us to hold of God's love for us- regardless of what our insides and our outside look like, God is ever present on the Mobius strip. There is no hiding from God's love and grace for us. Parker called this "living life on the Mobius strip" when we make choices that are life giving. Those choices impact both our internal and our external lives.

In a few minutes we will move into Whitlock Hall for our Annual Meeting. At that time, we will review the past year and we will look forward into this year. We will elect some new leadership. We will celebrate the leadership of those who are continuing and those who are stepping down. Each is valued. Each has gifts to bring to St. John's regardless of whether someone is serving in an elected position or serving quietly behind the scenes. The church is all of us together. We can become even more than we have been when we remember that we go forward "with God's help." Remember that the church is the place where we get to practice being human⁵ with all that that means. Each of us is necessary for St. John's to grow into and to remain a place where the love of God is evident to all that walk through our doors and to all who come into contact with any of us on the streets. We can do this with God's help.
Amen.

² Paraclete Press, 2013.

³ Teleconference January 23, 2014 on Fundraising.

⁴ <http://www.mobiusproductsandservices.com/tms.html> (January 25, 2014)

⁵ Attributed to James Luther Adams according to <http://uucaministers.blogspot.com/2013/02/practice-being-human-cl.html> (January 25, 2014).

3 Epiphany – Annual Meeting

Isaiah 9:1-4; Ps. 27: 1, 5-13; 1 Cor. 1:10-18; Mt. 4:12-23

January 26, 2014