"Collaborative Discipleship"
A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – January 21, 2024
Third Sunday After Epiphany – Lesson: Mark 1:14-20

Gracious God, thank you for calling us into discipleship and into deeper relationship with you, with others, and with creation. As we remember the story of Jesus and his first disciples, may we open our hearts this day to your Spirit's call to us in this time and place. Amen.

I'm sure that day started off fairly ordinary for Simon-Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Just another day of fishing – sailing their boats upon the Sea of Galilee, casting their nets, hoping and praying for a good catch. Fishing was their livelihood and their family businesses. It was the way they spent most of their days for most of their lives thus far. It was what was familiar.

And then Jesus comes along and interrupts that familiar, comfortable routine. "Follow me," he says. "Put down your nets. Get out of your boats. Let's go fish for people."

"Fish for people? What does that mean? Are you sure I don't need my net? Maybe we actually need some bigger nets?"

"No. No nets necessary. This is a different kind of fishing."

So, these newbie disciples followed Jesus and began to learn what fishing for people entailed.

I've often wondered what the first disciples knew before this moment. It's unclear from the sparse gospel narrative. Had they met Jesus before? Were they familiar with John and his baptism movement that had been taking place down at the Jordan River? If so, had word spread about John's arrest? Did they know that following Jesus might lead them into some risky territory?

One of the reasons the gospel writer tells us about John's arrest is because it foreshadows Jesus' arrest. It's also there to give us a sense of urgency to Jesus' public mission and ministry because it is beginning in the wake of this act of injustice against John. John had called out the exploits of the rich and powerful of his day and it had gotten him into deep trouble. A similar thing will happen to Jesus.

Though they might not have known exactly where this road would lead them, these peasant fishermen certainly did know something about the Roman Empire in which they lived. Historians note that the Galilean region, along with its fishing industry, was coming increasingly under Roman control during the first century. It was during that time that Herod Antipas was in charge of the region as the local client-king under the Romans. He was the one who would soon have John the Baptist executed. He was also the one who built the city of Tiberias on the shores of Galilee and named it after the emperor. The Sea of Galilee itself would become known as Lake Tiberias for quite a while from that time on.

Similar Romanization was happening across the empire. And with Roman control came Roman priorities. It's likely that Simon-Peter, Andrew, James and John saw some of these societal changes play out in their lifetime. And I wonder, by the time Jesus came along, how much of their daily catch

was going to feed their families, neighbors, and local community? And how much was being taken by the empire for other purposes? What were their feelings about this? Did they ever question or critique the imperial economic system or did they just resign themselves to the fact that this was how the world works?

We can't know all of their thoughts and perspectives. But we do know that they were willing to follow Jesus, even if it meant stepping out of what was familiar, stable, and relatively safe. They were willing to go with this new prophet and teacher who would guide them and show them a different vision for the way the world could work.

Jesus proclaimed, "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." These new disciples thought, "that sounds good to me; sign me up" and followed him to find out more about what this good news was.

And so, off they go to the nearby village Capernaum which becomes their home base for a while. And there, Jesus teaches in the synagogue, rids people of "unclean spirits," and heals people of diseases (including curing Simon-Peter's mother-in-law of a fever). Word spreads, people flock to him, and Jesus and his new disciples travel throughout Galilee so he can teach and heal more people.

It's evident by the way Mark tells this story, with one episode of healing after another, that the heart of this good news of the Kingdom of God is healing and liberation. The ministry that Jesus is offering, the good news that Jesus is bringing into the world, in both word and deed, is freedom – freedom from what is binding people, controlling them, holding them back; freedom from what is preventing people from being well, from feeling whole.

The good news that Jesus is bringing is health. But it is more than just individual physical health (though that is part of it). Throughout his ministry, Jesus demonstrated that God's deep, steadfast, fierce, and abundant love was a source of health and healing on multiple levels – healing for individuals, for relationships, for communities. And, if given the chance, this love might indeed heal entire societies, civilizations, the whole world. A just peace could prevail.

It's a lofty vision for sure, but that's the hope and ideal that Jesus proclaimed and worked towards – that love would liberate and heal on all levels.

But he couldn't do it by himself. He needed to catch some fisherman to join him and he needed to teach them how to catch others.

Sometimes people talk about this idea of fishing for people as primarily about trying to get people to believe a certain theology or join a certain church. I find that to be too narrow an understanding of evangelism. There's nothing wrong with sharing our beliefs or inviting people to our church. Those can be good things.

But when fear tactics, exclusionary ideologies, and emotional manipulation are used (as they often have been throughout Christian history) it causes damage to people and misses the point.

Instead, I think people-fishing is really much broader and much simpler than that. It's not about collecting souls, membership numbers, or winning arguments. It's about love. When we reach out, care for, and serve others with love, we are doing the work of discipleship; we are embodying and enacting Jesus' call and invitation to follow in his way.

Right from the beginning Jesus illustrated to his disciples that his priority was to love through service, care, and healing. And people *were* caught (in the best way) – they were caught up in the Spirit, caught up in God's love; liberated, transformed, and inspired as a result. A movement of love took root, sprung up in their midst, and began to grow. It was about loving people where they were.

This isn't to say Jesus didn't want to change hearts and minds. I think he did. Just a little later, in the second chapter of Mark, Jesus sees the tax collector Levi sitting in his tax booth. And he invites him to follow too. Fisherman are one thing, but a tax collector? This guy is about as unpopular as you can get. Many people likely saw him as a trader who was working for the Romans and exploiting his own people for his own gain. The way tax collectors made money for themselves was by taking more tax than required by the empire and keeping the balance.

But, instead of demonizing Levi and bad-mouthing tax collectors, Jesus invites him into this movement of love too. And so, Levi invites him over to dinner. I think Jesus sees this as another healing opportunity – an opportunity for Levi to change course in his own life and perhaps find a better calling and livelihood that won't hurt others. It's also an opportunity for some healing of his relationships within the community. Levi needed liberation. And everyone needed liberation from the taxation system that was enriching the empire and further impoverishing those who were already poor.

Some people were critical of Jesus' inclusivity, of course. Why would he eat with those sinner tax collectors? I wonder if they ever changed their minds. Probably some did. Maybe some didn't. But Jesus wasn't deterred from building this movement of love and bringing into it anyone and everyone who was willing to take part.

I think that is what discipleship is still all about. That is what our collaborative discipleship as a church is all about. It has always been a communal, collective project. We participate in this movement of love together.

Feeding those who are hungry in downtown Long Beach is an act of discipleship. Helping families get some of their basic needs met is too. As I do just about every year, I heard a few stories this past Christmas of tears, joy, and meaningful connections that happened when members of our church community delivered those needed gifts to our Christmas families. Mutual connection and caring service, listening to the needs of others, and responding with love. That's discipleship.

Caring for the sick, the lonely, the grieving, those dealing with any of life's challenges is discipleship too. All of us become those who are in need of care sometimes. And all of us are called to be caregivers at times too.

Coming together as a community to praise God together (as we do every Sunday); to uplift, inspire, and encourage one another; to share with one another and learn from one another. This is discipleship too.

Utilizing our collective energy, creativity, time, talents, and resources to edge this world a little closer to that vision of just and peaceful coexistence, that vision that Jesus proclaimed – that is discipleship too.

People talk about the decline of the church in America. Membership is shrinking. The number of those who claim no particular religious affiliation are consistently on the rise. These things are true.

And yet, I also see plenty of Jesus-following disciples still doing the work of love all around me (including all of you, of course). And I see plenty of people of other faith traditions, as well as those who don't claim a particular faith tradition, doing this work of love too; people whose lives are rooted in and shine with the same love that animated Jesus.

I don't know what might happen to "The Church" as we know it, but I'm pretty sure that as long as the Spirit moves and God's love inspires, there will still be disciples and there will still be work to do.

Jesus didn't do his work to prop up an institution. In fact, he was sometimes pretty critical of institutions. Instead, Jesus started a movement of love in his time. He took up the mantle of those prophets and leaders who had gone before him and called people to join him in this work.

This is what spiritual community is all about. We do this discipleship thing together.

And, no matter where the future may take us, I do think that there are some virtues and values of discipleship that can help guide us. These are virtues and values the first disciples needed and so do we.

We have to have courage to get out of our comfortable boats and follow where the path of love may lead us, even when it's uncertain and even scary.

We have to practice generosity – of time, of resources, of spirit.

We have to be moved and motivated by compassion, by love and empathy for all people and all creation.

We have to be willing to learn new skills. We also have to be open to new growth and new learning, to being changed, inspired, shaped, and transformed by our encounters with others.

We have to maintain a prayerful spirit, a contemplative awareness of the world around us – open to seeing and experiencing God in the everyday and the ordinary. This long journey requires us to stay rooted in God's love and grounded in that which is life-giving, energizing, and connects us deeply to the One who is our Source of life and love.

"Follow me," says Jesus, once again.

So, let us link up arms and take the next step of discipleship together in community. And let's see where this path of love will lead us.

Amen.