

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, January 27, 2008

Sermon Text: Matthew 4:12-23

Let us pray. Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, this is said in a joking manner so if you take it seriously, it will hurt my feelings. This may surprise some of you, but I used to have a real job. Okay. Thank you. At that job, there were endless complaints and squabbles among the personnel and yelling and screaming in the office, and occasionally I would have to ask someone to just leave. Now that I think about it, maybe God was preparing me for the church.

For three summers I worked as a day shift manager at Lake Arrowhead campground in Myrtle Beach. During the month of July, my schedule began at 60 hours per week, and then added up from there. No lunch break. Constantly there on my feet. Constant people. I would often go a week and a half, no day off! When I did get a day off, I would go to the pier, and just lean against the rail and stare at the ocean, exhausted, and hypnotized by the waves, trying to relax from all the hours and all the voices of all the people in my head. Most of the other people on that pier were on vacation, and they would want to talk to me, which is not what I had in mind, and they asked me what I was doing and why I didn't have a pole. So here's what I did. I took my father's big old saltwater rod and reel and a heavy sinker, and I cast it out, no bait on it! No bait! I didn't want to mess with a fish. I just sat there for hours, hypnotized by the waves and fake fishing, fake fishing so people would leave me alone.

Now, everyone here knows the Gospel passage where Jesus calls his disciples to follow him, and to become, in the King James Version, fishers of men. We know it. We've heard the phrase. We've sung songs about it. Fishers of people! Disciples making disciples.

I also know that some of you are here from your busy exhausting week, resting, and you know well that we are called to be fishing for people with our faith in the Gospel as the bait, and you say you know that. You know that. I hear some of you silently screaming, “Please Preacher, please! Not one more demand! Please! Let me rest!” By the way, I'm told by one of my former members that there is no sleep like church sleep. I never get to do that.

I know that you need rest. I know that. I understand that physically and emotionally and spiritually we need to rest, but we also need purpose to give our lives meaning, and if the Gospel is good news and hope and deep peace and joy for us, if we have taken it in, and it has become a part of us and changed us, then why on earth would we want to keep it a secret? If we know in our hearts that it is not striving and exhaustion that we were made for, but that we were made to love God and love others in a sacred triangle of grace that begins with God, if we know that, then it is not work to share our faith. It is an act of joy. It is an act of joy.

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The idea of joy and sharing our faith is foreign to many of us. I know that it is. The very idea of sharing our faith at all is foreign to us. We think somebody might be offended, and so we don't. Someone might have a question that we cannot answer. We're not Biblical scholars, so we don't. Or someone might make fun of us in this day where faith is fodder for comedians' jokes. Everyone knows, everyone knows it just really doesn't matter that much what you believe, just be nice. We hear that. Keep your faith to yourself, and just pretend those deep questions that keep you up at night just don't matter anymore. I hear that.

Will Willimon and Stanley Horowitz raised that issue in this way at Duke University a few years ago. According to Willimon, the popular idea that all religions are essentially the same and merely a matter of personal opinion and don't matter that much is both intellectually dishonest and ultimately intolerant. It is to say that religion matters not at all. I agree with now Bishop Willimon when he suggests that “this is a merely a way of saying religion is wonderful as long as we first all agree that it doesn't mean anything.” Biting commentary.

I am here today to say it does, it does mean something, and your faith does matter, and your deep questions do matter, and you are not the only one having these questions. The questions of meaning and purpose and love and hate and forgiveness and grace are questions that did not evolve. They are from somewhere else. They are spiritual questions that haunt us, and they are from somewhere else just as Jesus is from somewhere else, just as Jesus said his kingdom is from somewhere else. Not of this world! Not subject to decay and will not turn to dust and blow away just as everything else in this world does including me, including you.

God's Holy Spirit sends these questions to the busy and the exhausted, to the retired and the exhausted, to the poor and the exhausted, and to the young, and I do love the young because they throw up the idea and the questions, why are things the way they are? The young who dream of a future where things make sense because they are beginning to notice they don't seem to now. A future no one on this earth has ever known. The dream of the perfect creation I believe God dreamt for us, and we left behind when we rejected God, and served ourselves instead. That's not a one-time story from Genesis. That is an every person, every generation story. Rejecting God, and serving ourselves and the consequences thereof.

Why are we here to worship today? I know it is partially on a Sabbath day to rest our souls, but also because we feel drawn in our souls to find that something that is real, to be filled with that something that is real, more than real than our 401K's, more lasting than silver or gold, more lasting even than our friends and families and bodies and lives. We come to find and to be filled with a glimpse of God's love, God's forgiveness and grace. We come to find belonging somewhere that we do not have to earn it. It's just here. It's God's gift, and all that is true and all that is good. God's love, forgiveness and grace are here and free for the taking. Take it! Take it!

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But what about out there? What about others who are starving for meaning and for purpose, for what's left of God's hope and free grace instead of one more place to work and earn their way in? What about them? Our faith, our glow of deep joy in the hope of God has given us, is supposed to give us the bait, to witness our faith to others as we fish for men and women, as we seek to invite and make new disciples, not as an act of drudgery, not as a church program, but as an act of grace itself, to offer people what they already are looking for – love, forgiveness, acceptance, grace, hope, and belonging. Not earned, and pledged and hazed into as a club, but Christian faith, freely given by God, and freely offered by God's people. Do we have good bait? Are we seriously fishing for people, or are we, as I was, fake fishing, watching the waves, just ducking in here for a while to rest before the next busy week? Have we simply written off making disciples as irrelevant under the post-modern assumption that religion is wonderful as we long as we first agree that it doesn't mean anything? If we have, then to carry my fishing analogy even further, have we swallowed that assumption simply to let ourselves off the hook? I think my analogy has broken down.

I'm reminded of a story from the “Peanuts” comic strip. Lucy in the “Peanuts” comic strip asks Linus, “Why do you suppose people are here anyway? What are we here for?” Linus says, “Well, someone said that every person is on earth to make someone else happy.” Lucy ponders for a moment, and then she screams out, “Somebody's not doing their job!”

Maybe somebody isn't doing their job, and maybe it's you and me! If the purpose of life is soul-building and faith-sharing, disciple-making and offering God's grace to others, then maybe there are people unhappy, hurting and lonely right now because we are too timid and shy. Or maybe we have simply bought into the cultural lie that it really doesn't matter! The marching orders given to the church, the marching order was to make disciples, to share what we have been given, to invite, to welcome and incorporate, and that is what your Natural Church Development survey, what this congregation told me, that we at Main Street are simply not doing. We're not doing it – inviting, welcoming, and incorporating. We're not doing a very good job.

We are called to multiply, and multiplication is a powerful way to grow when it is put into action. Most people understand the power of compound interest, but have not thought about it applied to sharing their faith through inviting and welcoming and incorporating unchurched or fallen-away people into the family of Christ here at Main Street. If this place helps meet your spiritual needs and your spiritual hunger and your desire for meaning and purpose beyond what the world has to offer, then what in the world makes you think it would not meet the needs of others? Others out there floundering around.

Jesus started with only twelve. If we started here with two people, who invited and welcomed and incorporated two more each year, and those new two did the same each year, and their two new disciples did the same each year, each one making only two disciples each year through the magic of multiplication in 20 years we would have made

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1,048,000 new disciples! One quarter of the population of this state! In 30 years, over one billion people! In 33 years, more people than there are now on this earth!

We are called to be God’s witnesses on this earth. We are beginning this program with prayer. Some of you have seen, and I hope the Sunday school classes took seriously that we are asking you for the next few weeks to search your brain and write down your own private list of whom you have influence over. The people over whom you have influence are our potential congregation. Your friends that know that you are a committed Christian. Your friends who are fallen away or are completely unchurched are floundering out there looking for meaning and belonging. Who are your friends from whom you may be keeping your faith a secret? Write those people down, and spend five minutes at the beginning of every Sunday School class, please, for the next several weeks, every UMW circle, men’s group, committee meeting even, write them down and pray for them.

Now, I know some of you may never get to the point of inviting them, but I’m asking you only to write down your list, keep your list and pray for them. For them to find the peace in heart and acceptance and joy of being loved and embraced by the creator God, and knowing of the personality of God through knowing Jesus Christ, and pray for them to come into the bosom of this family of Christ and feel the love that is exchanged here. You can do that! Pray for them earnestly! First, we pray!

This is an important step, praying and listing the people over whom we personally have influence, people that we care for and people that care for us. This is our potential congregation. They know us! They know our faith such as it is. They see us. They watch us. They have some inkling of where our hearts are. Jesus’ heart was to seek out and save the lost. That was in essence his mission statement. It should also be ours. Jesus’ kingdom was not of this world, but it met heartfelt needs, needs deeper than anything in this world can touch.

John and Charles Wesley, we’ve been thinking of history today, historically John and Charles started out with small groups, and then Methodism exploded across England and across the world. It exploded through small groups, warmed hearts, and prayer and sharing of faith, and victories and defeats. Sharing also talents and treasure as a response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. I think the Wesleys were onto something. Small groups and prayer and sharing work just as it worked for Jesus.

We live in a time that is far more violent than any other time in history, and we continue to live on a planet where millions live in poverty, where thousands of children die every single day due to issues related to malnutrition, and we live in a place while this is happening where we spend millions on diets and surgery and health care for a different kind of malnutrition – eating the wrong things and too much of it. We think we are smarter and better than all those who came before, but the facts do not support that premise. We are not doing better as a species. The reality is we are broken. We need

“Multiplication”

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God. We need help in staying on track and living a Godly life, connected to God and to others in that triangle of grace, which begins with God.

Annie Dillard once wrote, “There is always an enormous temptation to diddle around making itsy bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy bitsy years on end.” Let’s leave all that itsy bitsy thinking far behind. As Natural Church Development says, the purpose of an apple tree is not to make an apple. The purpose of an apple tree is to make another apple tree! You are disciples of Jesus Christ. It does not end with you. Nor even with the good fruits that you can produce. Your purpose, as a disciple, is to make another disciple.

As the early Methodist movement did, they would stay in a circuit rider’s one place long enough to build up and train leadership so that class and band could go on by itself, and the circuit rider would move to the next place. That was the genius of early Methodism. It is still the genius that Christ exemplified for us with his disciples.

As a Sunday school teacher you should be training another Sunday school teacher. As a trustee, train another trustee when your term is up. As a Soup Kitchen volunteer, recruit another Soup Kitchen volunteer. As a youth worker or helper or breakfast cooker or ramp builder or prison ministry volunteer or staff, train and let people go, and let them multiply and multiply. It makes all that we do bigger and better and more people become involved and more people impressed and see that God’s love is in our hearts, in our hands, in our outreach. All these good things depend upon constant influx of new people, new disciples. Multiplication is our job. Making disciples who make disciples who make disciples. Sharing and showing and living unashamed, living out unashamed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us be mindful of where we stand. Midstream in the history of this congregation. We have a proud history. Let us have an even better future. Let us do our part. Amen.