

## January 21, 2024 Sermon Manuscript

### Mark 1:14-20

<sup>14</sup> After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. <sup>15</sup> “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God\* has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

<sup>16</sup> As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup> “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” <sup>18</sup> At once they left their nets and followed him.

<sup>19</sup> When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. <sup>20</sup> Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.”

\* Or *God's Empire* (as translated by Scot McKnight)

### Rethinking How to Fish For People (Mark 1:14-20)

For the second straight Sunday our gospel passage describes Jesus calling some of His initial disciples. And this time, it's four fishermen: in two sets of brothers, Simon & Andrew and James & John. But what is most well-known from this passage is how Jesus famously tells these fishermen (in verse 17) that, if they follow Him, He will make them fishers of people!

Now, when Jesus says this to Simon & Andrew, it is undoubtedly meant to be good news for them, signifying that He's calling them to a higher purpose, one with eternal significance of not just learning from Jesus how to live eternally themselves, but calling other people to do the same. But *if this is* meant to be good news, then how has it come to be that so many of us (if not all of us) have such baggage around evangelism (a word which literally just means ‘to share the good news’)?

Well, today I want to draw from the work of Gravity Commons and revisit some concepts we covered in our “Life On Mission” series during last year's Lenten Wednesdays, to suggest that the discomfort many of us have experienced or continue to feel around common approaches ‘evangelism’ is probably entirely legitimate and something we should give some attention to rather than feeling guilty about it. That's right: if you feel uncomfortable with evangelism or have had experiences with it that gave you an icky vibe, I have no interest in delegitimizing or minimizing that. Rather, I have some good news to share with you today: that Jesus does invite us to learn from Him how to become fishers of people as we go through our lives. But to do that in our day He calls us to move beyond the many toxic approaches to evangelism employed by many Christians & Churches today, and learn instead to love and minister to people like Jesus did. #

Last week, we talked about how much the Church began to change in the 4th century once it became married to worldly power with the legalization of Christianity by Rome.<sup>1</sup> Well, more than a thousand years after that, a further extension of that change came in how the Church's approach to mission and evangelism was deformed with the onset of Colonialism in the 15th Century (the 1400s). Between the years of 1452 and 1493,<sup>2</sup> the Church issued a series of decrees that gave European Christians license to use violent force to convert people in foreign lands. For example, on your bulletin insert is an excerpt from the third and final decrees of 1493, when the Pope pronounced:

"Among other works well pleasing to the Divine Majesty and cherished of our heart, this assuredly ranks highest, that in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself. We have indeed learned that you, who for a long time had

<sup>1</sup> A process which began around 325 AD, but was formalized in 380 AD.

<sup>2</sup> the Papal Bulls of 1452, 1454, and 1493

intended to seek out and discover certain islands and mainlands remote and unknown and not hitherto discovered by others, to the end that you might bring to the worship of our Redeemer and the profession of the Catholic faith their residents and inhabitants...<sup>3</sup>

Through decrees like this, European Christians were given theological justification to seize inhabited lands as their own with the stated goal of bringing the people living in those places to the faith, to make them Christians. And so, we all know what happened: we know that not only did Columbus sail the ocean blue in 1492, but that voyages like his led to the Europeans conquering the indigenous peoples of these lands in the name of Jesus and Christianity. As a result of superior weaponry<sup>4</sup> and their domesticated horses<sup>5</sup>, the European conquerors had a massive advantage over what were in some cases very sophisticated civilizations. So Europeans employed technological advantages to coerce the indigenous peoples to submit and convert and be baptized (and they also enriched themselves in the process). But their philosophy was that the ends justified the means. As long as people were “becoming Christians” - even if by force - it was all worth it, because at least these heathens were being saved from hell. And even when the unforeseen factor of European germs like smallpox sped up the Europeans’ victory<sup>6</sup> - wiping out at estimated 20 million or 95% of the two continents’ population - the conquistadors took comfort that at least these people were dying in the Lord.

Now, of course, none of us would ever imagine using horses and weapons today to bring people to Jesus today (I hope). However, this Colonial approach to mission *is* our heritage of evangelism in the Western Church, to the extent that the imaginations Christians have for how evangelism should be done remain perhaps even more influenced by the methods of Colonialism than the (evangelistic) methods of the Early Church.<sup>7</sup>

For example, it is this legacy of Colonialism that inclines many Christians today to use methods of (what’s called) coercive evangelism - where nonbelievers are confronted with “truths” from the Bible in order to “win”<sup>8</sup> them to the faith - often without any reservation.

<sup>3</sup> Continued: "We have indeed learned that you, who for a long time had intended to seek out and discover certain islands and mainlands remote and unknown and not hitherto discovered by others, to the end that you might bring to the worship of our Redeemer and the profession of the Catholic faith their residents and inhabitants..."

<sup>4</sup> "Steel is an almost uniquely European technology...The conquistadors who swept through the New World were armed with steel swords forged in the Spanish city of Toledo...These swords, from the Spanish *espada robera*, or sword of the robe, were invented in the late fifteenth century as an ultra-modern, ultra-chic dress-sword for the upwardly mobile...By the mid-fifteenth century, the latest forging techniques were used to create the strongest, sturdiest, lightest and most flexible armor and swords. Civilizations in the Americas lacked equivalent iron resources... Protected solely by bronze weapons and knives carved from stone, the Inca Empire fell easily to deadly Spanish steel." <https://www.pbs.org/gunsgermsteel/variables/steel.html>

<sup>5</sup> "Spanish horses were instrumental in the conquest of the New World. Neither the Aztec nor the Inca had ever seen humans riding animals before; the psychological impact of mounted troops was tremendous... The conquistadors who sailed to the New World had grown up on ranches and farms. They had ridden horses since their youth, and brought their finest animals with them. The consequences for the peoples of the New World were catastrophic.... (For example,) On the morning of November 16, 1532, a surprise charge of just 37 Spanish horses, concealed in the Inca town of Cajamarca, unleashed an orgy of bloodshed. Europeans had known for centuries that foot soldiers stood a good chance against cavalry if they stood firm and repelled the outnumbered mounted troops. But the Inca had no experience of this, nor could they have read about others' experiences, since they were geographically isolated and had no written records from which to learn. Instead, they panicked and tried to flee, allowing the outnumbered conquistadors to run through them with great speed and efficiency." <https://www.pbs.org/gunsgermsteel/variables/horses.html>

<sup>6</sup> "But weapons alone can't account for the breathtaking speed with which the indigenous population of the New World were completely wiped out...Within just a few generations, the continents of the Americas were virtually emptied of their native inhabitants - some academics estimate that approximately 20 million people may have died in the years following the European invasion - up to 95% of the population of the Americas...No medieval force, no matter how bloodthirsty, could have achieved such enormous levels of genocide. Instead, Europeans were aided by a deadly secret weapon they weren't even aware they were carrying: Smallpox... When the Europeans arrived, carrying germs which thrived in dense, semi-urban populations, the indigenous people of the Americas were effectively doomed. They had never experienced smallpox, measles or flu before, and the viruses tore through the continent, killing an estimated 90% of Native Americans. Smallpox is believed to have arrived in the Americas in 1520 on a Spanish ship sailing from Cuba, carried by an infected African slave. As soon as the party landed in Mexico, the infection began its deadly voyage through the continent. " <https://www.pbs.org/gunsgermsteel/variables/smallpox.html>

<sup>7</sup> Our Church in the west still has latent colonial intuitions and assumptions that we have never repented of as a culture. Now, this isn't about assigning blame or making us feel bad; this is about moving forward into faithfulness and the fullness of the life Christ would have for us.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, Jesus doesn't speak in terms of 'winning', so that's the first sign these approaches are off-base

Some of you know that on New Year's I got an opportunity to go down to the Rose Bowl in Pasadena. And it was really a fun experience - would've been more fun if Alabama would've won the game - but the only thing that was worse than the result of the game is what I experienced earlier that day at the Rose Parade. We had to get there early to get a spot along the parade route. But what surprised me was that while both sides of the street were lined with people waiting for the parade to come, there was walking up and down the street was this group of street preachers with signs and bullhorns calling people to repent and warning all of the "fornicators" & "idolaters" & "abortionists" & so on of the hellfire awaiting them. There must've been sixty or seventy of these folks each in their groups of about ten: just a few minutes after you endured one of the groups coming by, here would come another one. And it was really awful; I found myself wanting to apologize to all the people standing around me and insist to them that this didn't reflect Jesus (or His heart toward them) at all, because Jesus loved people with truth and grace together, and truth without grace is not God's truth at all - even if it's quoting scripture - because God's truth sees people as God sees them and not just what is wrong with them. Of course, the logic of this approach is that if you can so overwhelm people with truth then they'll become helpless to do anything but fall to their knees to confess Jesus as Lord. But of course this didn't happen.

Now I'll confess that in my own fundamentalist background I've actually done things *almost* this extreme. However, evangelism doesn't have to look this extreme to be coercive. When Christians ask folks things like, "if you died tonight, do you know without a shadow of a doubt that you'd go to heaven?" this is coercive, too, because it's attempting to bring people into life with God using fear & shame rather than love.

So what are the traces of Colonialism in these approaches? The belief that no matter how unloving one's approach, the ends justify the means. The rationale is that if just one person converts, then it was all worth it, though this fails to account for all of the potential converts whom it drives away from Jesus.

Gravity explains that another technique that's often employed is called "inadequacy gospeling." This was borrowed from the consumer marketing industry, where the evangelizer highlights potential deficiencies in people's lives: maybe they're divorced or struggling with sexual brokenness or addiction of some kind. Well, inadequacy gospeling presents Jesus as the solution to all those problems. Now, certainly Jesus has some good news and help to offer for each any such struggles, but inadequacy gospeling seeks to leverage people's pain to secure short-term, snap decisions for Christ<sup>9</sup> by giving the impression that Jesus will make all these problems *go away*,<sup>10</sup> even though He doesn't promise this, sorta like advertisements for products often promise dreams they can't deliver. But because the solitary goal is conversions, there is little consideration given to the potential impact of someone coming to Christ under false pretenses.

So the legacy of Colonialism in coercive evangelism includes (a) the belief that the ends justify the means and often fails to account for collateral damage that occurs and (b) while it doesn't use the *technologies* of horses & weapons, it employs coercive *techniques* rather than love with the hope of securing certain result. So if you've been on either side of these approaches and have felt the ick, then that's actually a very appropriate response. But I hope you can hear this good news: [that Jesus does invite us to learn from Him how to become fishers of people as we go through our lives. But to do that in our day He calls us to move beyond the many toxic approaches to evangelism employed by many Christians & Churches today, and learn instead to love and minister to people like Jesus did. #](#)

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<sup>9</sup> Now, you may say, "well, Jesus got a snap decision from these four fishermen," and maybe so. But even if that's true, it was not done with half truths or lack of relational connection.

<sup>10</sup> which He never promises

And so, how do we see Jesus ministering? Well, following along with a few points I included on your insert, we've already said that Jesus loved people in both grace & truth, and never chose one at the expense of the other; and we see this in the way Jesus interacts with all sorts of different people in the gospels.<sup>11</sup> He connects and empathizes with people while still calling them deeper into kingdom living, and He calls us to do the same in situations<sup>12</sup> where it is appropriate and sensitive to do so.

But how do you discern when and with whom it might be appropriate to do so? Well, this is the second point, that Jesus was always on the lookout for People of Peace. **A Person of Peace is simply someone that God has prepared ahead of time to hear good news through you.** And the way we identify whether someone is a Person of Peace for us is

- when they have a welcoming posture toward us - so, they're open to relationship
- when they display some desire to serve us - so, it's not a one way relationship where we're like the colonial hero, conquering them with all that we have to offer
- and when they indicate an openness to receive from us spiritually: they seem interested in such things right now and ask good questions.

Only when all three of these elements are present,<sup>13</sup> then God might be inviting us to participate in some way He is at work; only then should we invest energy in specifically calling someone into some way of the kingdom that may be eluding them.

But even then, it still requires listening and wisdom on our part to what sort of good news people need to hear. Gravity notes insightfully that not everyone is asking the question of how can i get forgiveness of my sins?" - especially today. For some, the point of connection is their loneliness, and they're wondering "Where can I find community?"; others are scared and wondering whether there is a safe place for them. In our passage today, these four fishermen weren't worried about their sins, so much as they were part of a people who for 400 years had been looking for the promised Messiah to free them from foreign rule. And they follow Jesus because they believe He's Him!<sup>14</sup>

Jesus essentially ministered to believers and nonbelievers - or those who were following Him and who were not following Him - He essentially ministered to all of them in the same way, because in either case the goal is the same: for the person to take another step toward or deeper into the life of His Kingdom. And Gravity suggests that we should take a similar approach: be alert for people of peace, listen for where God may be at work in their lives,

#### Ways Jesus Loved & Ministered

1. He loved people in both Grace *and* Truth (Jn 1:17): connecting & empathizing without minimizing the distinctions of eternal living.
2. He looked for People of Peace (identified by Lk 10:1-12 as those who welcome you and who show a desire to serve *you*, but also to receive *from* you spiritually) while being a Person of Peace himself.
3. He listened to people to discern what good news of God's kingdom they needed to hear (there are many doors, not just forgiveness). (e.g. Jn 4, Jn 8:6b-11, Jn 10:10, Jn 10:28, Jn 14:3, Jn 15:15-16, Jn 21:15-19, Mt 6:31-33, Mt 12:49, Mt 28:20)
4. He celebrated any step toward Kingdom living as success. (e.g. Lk 1:49-50, Lk 7:9, Lk 7:43-47, Mk 10:13,16, Mk 10:42, Mt 15:28)

<sup>11</sup> Jesus1) connects with people & empathizes with them while 2) maintaining boundaries and inviting them into responsibility.

<sup>12</sup> Never sacrificing connection with others by trying to overpower them with truth, while also never compromising truth just to maintain a relationship.

<sup>13</sup> To be alert to this, of course, requires that we live our life on mission,

- with a posture of looking for where God may be at work and inviting us to participate;
- with a posture of mutual submission, where we are willing to receive from others and not be like ones who have something to offer others, but need nothing ourselves;
- we must value people enough to listen to them, rather than engaging conversations in a manner of just seeking to get the next word ourselves;
- and we have to be willing to risk meeting people of Unpeace, being exposed as Jesus followers and risk people thinking that's strange.

<sup>14</sup> It might stand out to some how instantly they seem to drop everything to follow Jesus: abandoning their whole way of living in a matter of seconds after He calls them. Although there is reason to believe this may not have been their first interaction with Jesus.

John and Mark's accounts of these first disciples being called are not easy to harmonize. For example, according to Mark, John the Baptist has already been arrested (Mk 1:14a), while John reports that Jesus found he and Andrew while they were with John the Baptist (Jn 1:35). Some scholars have speculated that Mark is re-appropriating something that happened later (which could explain why the 4 disciples in Mark follow Jesus so easily and without question). Others may interpret this as signifying the power of Jesus speaking a word, as some interpret John 18:6.

and ask God to show us what good news of His kingdom they may need to hear.<sup>15</sup> And if that step happens to be conversion, then hallelujah, but like Jesus we can consider our contribution to someone taking any step toward the kingdom a success worth celebrating!

And so, **the good news is that Jesus does invite us to learn from Him how to become fishers of people as we go through our lives. But to do that in our day He calls us to move beyond the many toxic approaches to evangelism employed by many Christians & Churches today, and learn instead to love and minister to people like Jesus did.** What step is He calling you to take toward that today? Maybe it is in repenting or turning away from some imaginations for evangelism that are coercive, even if we learned them in the Church. Or perhaps you were never on that train or already left it behind, but you haven't been willing to adopt a posture of looking for ways God might be calling you to partner with Him as you go about your life. Or maybe you have heard all of this before, last Lent, but the Lord is inviting you to affirm once again your desire to continue on the journey learning to love others the way He does.

Will you pray with me?

God, thank you for your invitation to learn from you how to be fishers of people and the eternal purpose that gives to our lives. Whatever step you may be calling us to take in that regard, I pray you would grace us with willingness and imagination for some concrete way we can follow through to become fishers for people with You.

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.




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<sup>15</sup> It may be in the area of their security, significance, or belonging. Trustworthy answers for all of these needs can be found in the Kingdom of God.