

Sermon
Epiphany 3-B
Saint Andrew's, Methuen
January 24, 2021
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Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 62:6-14
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

When I was a boy, my father would take me and my brother on a fishing trip each summer to one of the TVA mountain lakes in western North Carolina, where we'd fish mainly for bass and walleye pike. Several times each trip my father would say, as if to justify the time we were spending would say, “You can't fish for people until you learn how to fish for fish”.

I realize now that this statement has caused me a lot of confusion through the years, because it created an image of discipleship, fishing for people, that was deceptive and painful in as much it meant trying to get people to bite on a lure, so they could be hooked and reeled in. This is exactly what some preachers and TV evangelists have done.

This is a central reason why many Episcopalians are allergic to evangelism, which they see as at best a tacky enterprise and at worst an immoral one. Therefore, as a Church we have not been very good at growing our congregations. We're happy to welcome you if you happen to wander in, but we're not going out into the world to invite you in.

But as I was pondering this gospel reading, what came to mind was a different, more appealing, image of fishing for people:

In the Oscar-winning movie Titanic, after the great ship has broken apart and sunk into the depths of the frigid North Atlantic, some of the officers in the lifeboats were going through the darkness calling out, looking for survivors floating in the water. **They are fishing for people—fishing for people in order to save them FROM freezing to death and to save**

them FOR the life God created them for. You'll remember teenage Rose was rescued in just this way and was able to live a long, abundant life.

This positive meaning of evangelism is also evident in a modern parable I first heard in 1986. I imagine it's familiar to many of you.

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves, they went out day or night tirelessly searching for the lost. This wonderful little station saved many lives, so that it became famous. Some of those saved and various others in the surrounding areas wanted to become associated with the station and give their time, money, and effort to support its work. They bought new boats and trained new crews. The little lifesaving station grew. Some of the new members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea.

They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in an enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a favorite gathering place for its members, and they redecorated it beautifully and furnished it as a sort of club. Few of the members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The purpose of lifesaving was still discussed, but most of the team were too busy or lacked the necessary commitment to take part in the lifesaving activities personally. About this time, a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people.

They were dirty and sick, some had skin of a different color, some spoke a strange language, and the beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside. At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities, as it was unpleasant and a hindrance to the club's regular pattern. But some members insisted that lifesaving was their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of various

kinds of people shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin another lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that happened in the old station. They evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station began. If you visit the seacoast today, you will find many exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, but now most of the people drown!

Here's the thing: Are the gospel stories only descriptions of what happened 2000 years ago or are they also, and more importantly, descriptions of what Jesus is saying to us here and now?

This morning do we hear Jesus calling not just Peter, Andrew, James, and John, but you and me, calling Saint Andrew's Parish, into his way of life?

It a way of life with two parts: following Jesus: which means letting him teach us every day how to live and love in the Realm of God—to walk the way of the cross;

And then caring enough every day to do the messy, uncomfortable work of fishing for people who are drowning.

Ultimately, it's up to God how people respond. All we can do is imitate the disciples whom Mark tells us, "immediately left their nets and followed Jesus."