

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Mark 1:14-20

“Fishers of Men”

Before I begin to look at the Gospel lesson – I would like to express how very blessed and privileged I feel to be preaching this weekend. Thirty six years ago, on January 22, 1976, my father, John Edward Commins, was called home, suddenly, to be with the Lord. I feel truly blessed to be preaching the Word of God, this weekend especially. I am the man I am today because God blessed me with a father who was my role model. He loved his Lord Jesus, his wife, his four children, his country, and his church. I am grateful that my family is blessed to be his family – and I remember, honor and love him – and of course, miss him very much. His devotion to Jesus taught all of us a priceless lesson. My father also taught me to honor my word, to be a person of integrity – which I learned through following his example. He taught me to protect the name that I have been given – one passed down from his father. Your word and your name are an indication of who you are. I remember my dad telling me how his dad, my Grandpa Commins (also John Edward) used to get very upset when the Brooklyn Daily Eagle would misspell our last name in the sports pages giving the results of the football games for St. John's Prep.. My dad was the captain of the football team and their running back – so he saw a lot of action. They would give our name a U instead of an O, spelling it “Cummins” (like the diesel engine) and not the correct “Commins.” It happens a lot, but it especially upset my grandfather. Your name is how people relate to you; it is by your name that people identify you, and they call you. It is by name that Jesus called His Apostles, and it is by name that He calls you!

Today's Holy Gospel brings us to another one of my most favorite places on the face of this earth - the Sea of Galilee. Being able to look out at the sea, knowing that Jesus stood on the shore of the Sea of Galilee – which is known as the Sea or Lake of Tiberius, or the Lake of Gennesaret is beyond imagination. What is a Gennesaret? It means harp shaped, and if you look at a map of Israel you will see that the Sea of Galilee is indeed shaped like an ancient harp. It is certainly indescribable. Remarkably, it remains mostly unchanged to this day.

It is there that Jesus meets two sets of brothers - Andrew and Peter and then James and John. These four men are fishermen – making their livelihood from catching fish. Jesus tells them to leave everything and that they should come and follow Him and He will make them “become *fishers of men!*” Several translations omit the word become, simple saying “*I will make you fishers of men.*” The Greek verb *γίνομαι* (*ginomai*) means to come into being. This means that a transformation will take place, and as we learn through the Gospels, there would be a great transformation in their lives – a transformation from fishermen to shepherds. There is a great difference between catching – and keeping – and that is the difference between a fisherman and a shepherd. That transformation would take the better part of three years to happen.

Jesus' words “*Follow me*” are **not the invitation to be saved but the call to service**. It is no small thing to give up everything to follow Jesus. To follow Jesus Christ is **to set aside our own goals and pleasures and to grasp onto the purposes for which God created us**. Those purposes are:

- To know Him in a personal way and
- To make disciples of others by teaching them all of Christ's commands.
- All those who truly follow Christ must exchange their affections, goals and priorities for His.

When Jesus “called” Peter and Andrew their goal in life was to be successful fishermen. In asking them to give up this goal, He asked them to follow Him and He would “make them become fishers for men’s souls.” Jesus did not simply ask His disciples to become fishers of men but rather He promised **to make them** become fishers of men.

How does Fishing for Men Relate to Following Christ? A lot of people see a fisherman as someone with a fishing pole casting a lure into the waters of a stream or a lake. However, that was most certainly not the case back in the first century when Jesus called His disciples. They caught fish with nets from boats, and through much experience they found that their best fishing took place at night. We know that this is true by looking at Luke 5:5, when Jesus told Peter to cast his nets on the other side of the boat. Peter reluctantly said, *“Master we have toiled all night and caught nothing nevertheless at your word I will let down the net.”* If you read John 21 – the Apostles were out fishing all night when they see the risen Jesus on the shore of the Galilee, where He makes them breakfast. So -how did they fish at night? They used a very powerful and effective method, light. Fish were attracted to light.

Jesus uses this same effective method to draw people to Himself. John tells us that Jesus said, *“I am the light of the world, He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life.”* (John 8:12) Just as fish are attracted to the disciples light, God wants people to be drawn to His light shining through His people. The light of every believer is the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in our lives. Paul stated in his second letter to the Corinthians *“For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are not the light we merely reflect the light of Jesus.”* (2 Corinthians 4:6-7)

To follow Jesus is a call that requires complete and immediate detachment from everything else. Peter and Andrew *“left their nets”* suggesting that they walked away from their occupation. James and John *“left their father”* suggesting that following Christ takes precedence over even maintaining close proximity to our family. It needs to be said that **the requirements for following Jesus are not the same for everyone.**

- For some it means leaving their present occupations to follow him.
- For others it means being willing to leave family connections and being close to family. I know what both of these are like as we were transplanted from occupations and family – to serve Him in His church.
- For everyone it is a willingness to exchange their affections, goals and priorities for his.

Jesus expects a commitment. These fishermen had moved from merely associating with Jesus to being in fellowship with Him. Jesus was calling Peter to catch people for the purpose of giving them the message of life – eternal life.

I want you to fast forward nearly three years – to John chapter 21. The Risen Jesus calls out to the Apostles and asks them if they have caught anything. A similar situation to the one in Luke 5 takes place but here Jesus tells them to set their net over the other side of the boat. (Gentile side of the boat – rather than Jewish side.) In fishing in the Sea of Galilee, a good Jewish Fisherman would point his boat north, and then let down his nets on the left side of the boat – the side of the lake where Capernaum was. This was considered the Jewish side of the boat, as

Third Sunday After Epiphany – January 22, 2012 Year B

opposed to the Gentile side, or right side facing the Gadarenes and the Decapolis. Jesus is expanding their horizons – and expanding their catch – the whole world and not just Israel. Right after this – after Jesus fed them once again – He reinstates Peter – and makes him not just a fisherman – but now – a shepherd asking him if he love Him? Jesus then tells Peter to “*tend My lambs; shepherd My sheep; tend My sheep.*” (John 21:15,16,17) The transformation is complete.

There is a great difference between catching – and keeping – and that is the difference between a fisherman and a shepherd.

We as Christians sometimes get the impression that we have got to do it all. How many of us imagine that God is waiting passively for us to initiate things. If we don't organize it, it won't get done! If we don't tell people the Good News of Jesus Christ- they won't hear it! If we don't change the world – it won't get changed. There is the train of thought that we need to be His hands. Well, may I suggest to you that **God doesn't need our hands** – after all – wasn't it His hands that made that magnificent sunrise this morning?

You know - God does not need us to do anything for Him. He is quite capable of creating a universe, with just a word, but He welcomes the efforts of those that He loves and honors and blesses those efforts – for they glorify Him. Jesus doesn't need the Apostles fish – but He invites them to bring their catch alongside. He asks them to work alongside Him. Unlike Luke 5, this time Jesus told them to go out and cast the net and He was not in the boat – their efforts brought in the catch that He designed for them. And so it is in ministry – Jesus sends us out – to do the work He has given us to do – that He has designed for us to do - and He blesses us and guides us all the while.

- Yes, we are called to work hard for Him.
- Yes, we are supposed to be organized – and there is no excuse for laziness, sloppiness or halfhearted effort in God's Kingdom. If it is God's work that we are doing – then we must do it with all of our might – and strive to do excellence in the process.

That is what I believe this message is about. Jesus calls us to ministry in His Name – to come alongside Him and be taught and fed. I am reminded of the adage: **“Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day, but teach that man to fish and he'll be fed for a lifetime”**

So I must ask you this: what is the most important thing we can do as *Fishers of Men*, as Christians? Well, when we know that someone is dying – one of the first questions that runs through our minds is “Are they saved?” What this should remind us of is what really matters in life is; what we are most concerned about at death – whether or not people know Jesus Christ. When someone is dying nothing else really matters, does it? I want to suggest to you that **that question should be on our hearts long before our loved ones are preparing to leave this world** – it should be a priority in our lives to make sure they know and love Jesus.

There have been times in the life of every Christian when they recognized that the greatest thing they could do in this life was introduce someone else to Christ. We don't do the saving, for only God can do that! We can be like Andrew who introduced his brother Peter to Jesus, and we can introduce our friends and family to Him as well. Have you ever really stopped to realize that Jesus wants you to be someone whose heart is moved to reach out to the lost people around you? In order to accomplish this goal in life would you be willing to

- Lay aside your personal ambition and plans in order to fully follow Christ.

Third Sunday After Epiphany – January 22, 2012 Year B

- To better reflect the light of Christ to those around you in your words, your attitude, and your actions.
- Look for and take opportunities to share with others what Jesus has done for you.

Let us always remember the words of Jesus invitation: *“Follow me and I will make you become Fishers of Men.”*

