

**Epiphany 3B – Annual Meeting
Mark 1:14-20
January 25, 2009**

Happy anniversary, dear All Saints. Yes, it's our anniversary again, the Sunday that marks two years since I came to be your rector. And I love that this anniversary comes on the day of our parish annual meeting. And that the day of our parish annual meeting always seems to include one of the gospel stories of the call of the fishermen. And that those things have all become part and parcel of our story together.

My first Sunday here, I really didn't even know where my office was. All I knew was that I was going to be preaching, celebrating, and then attending an annual meeting of a parish I had barely begun to know. I'll admit it. I was pretty scared, and awfully tense. So I decided then to loosen us all up with a joke ... a fishing joke featuring those two loony Yoopers, Eino and Toivo.

So last year, when the call of the fishermen turned up again in the gospel readings, it seemed appropriate to tell another Eino and Toivo fishing joke. And here we are, another year gone by. And so it must be time for ... you guessed it...

Eino and Toivo were fishing on the Ontonagon River. And they were having a great day. They were hauling them in, two big bucket loads full of fish. On their way back to where they left the truck, they ran into a guy from the DNR. The DNR guy says, "Do you have a license to catch those fish?" "Oh no," Eino says. "We don't need no license. Dese are our pet fish."

"Pet fish?" the DNR guy says. "Yes sir," Toivo says. "Every night we take dese fish down to da crik for a little exercise. And dey swims around for a while, den we give a whistle and dey yoomps back in da buckets and we go home."

“That’s a load a hooley,” the DNR guy says. “I never heard of such a thing.” So Eino and Toivo tell him to come down to the bank of the creek and they’ll show him. They pour the two buckets of fish back into the water, then stand there silently.

After a few minutes, the DNR guy says, “Well?” “Well what?” Eino asks. “Well when are you going to call them back?” “Call who back?” says Toivo. “The fish,” says the DNR guy.

Eino and Toivo look at him and ask, “What fish?”

What fish? That’s the question I would like to ask about today’s gospel lesson. What fish?

How many times we have heard this story -- how Jesus calls Peter and Andrew, then James and John, how they leave their nets, and their father in the boat, and everything about their former lives to follow him.

I have heard so many sermons on this text. I’ve even preached a few myself. I’ve heard sermons about call, sermons about discipleship, sermons about Jesus launching his ministry with ordinary folks like you and me. I’ve heard sermons about sacrificing everything to follow Jesus. Sermons about leaving the old behind and seizing the new.

But I’ve never heard a sermon on this text that deals with the fish.

Fish? What fish?, you ask. There are no fish in this gospel lesson ...are there?

Let’s look again, and see if we can find those fish. Mark writes, “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.”

OK, there are nets, there is a sea, and there are fishermen. But no fish. Not yet. Let’s read on. “And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

There! There are the fish!

Fish? What fish?

“I will make you fish for people.” Jesus says. There they are. Not the fish in the sea. Jesus intends his followers to see people as fish, to be netted, captured, and hauled into the kingdom. But every time we hear that line – or the more traditional line, “I will make you fishers of men” – we just blink our eyes and go all innocent and dumb, as though it couldn’t possibly apply to us.

Fish? What fish?

I am about to say a word. It is a word that might make you uncomfortable. It is a word that Episcopalians think does not apply to us, tainted as it is by its use on other lips. It is a word euphemistically referred to as “the E Word,” as though it could not even be spoken in polite conversation.

I’m going to say it anyway. Evangelism. There, that didn’t hurt so much, did it? But that is the point of the gospel lesson today. Evangelism.

And evangelism is not a bad thing, if you look at its roots. It comes from the Greek “euangelion” which means gospel, which means Good News. It comes from the same root as the word “angel.” It means to bring glad tidings, a wonderful announcement about what God has done, is doing, will do, and to call others to share that good news.

Evangelism. That is what Jesus calls us for. Jesus says, “Follow me.” And he doesn’t say, “follow me and I will make you have a lovely spiritual life.” He doesn’t say, “Follow me and I will make you materially wealthy.” He doesn’t say, “Follow me and I will make you a good person.” He doesn’t even say, “follow me and I will make you a servant to my world.”

He says, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

Why is this call so hard for us to hear? Why would we rather ask “what fish?” than wrestle with this call from Jesus? We don’t want to think about evangelism, and more importantly, we don’t want to have to DO evangelism. It’s scary, and it feels just a little tacky to even think about it.

And so the Episcopal Church has mostly abandoned Christ’s call to fish for people. Despite the “Decade of Evangelism” in the ’90s – remember that? Or the current program called the 20/20 Initiative – have you even heard of it? It’s a program to double the membership of the Episcopal Church by the year 2020. Despite those efforts, the Episcopal Church continues to be the FASTEST SHRINKING DENOMINATION IN AMERICA.

I don’t think it’s because of our liberal theology, or because of Gene Robinson. I think really it’s because most of us hear this gospel lesson and countless others like it and then blink and look away as though we had never heard the call to evangelism at all.

What fish?

We have abandoned the word evangelism and the work of evangelism to other denominations, to other kinds of Christians, to those with narrow and limiting agendas, to those eager to condemn the faithless even as they commend the faithful.

We must retrieve this word. We must retrieve this work. Episcopalians are a unique breed of Christian, and we have much to offer the world. We are Christians who think. We are Christians who tolerate. We are Christians who serve. We are Christians who value the struggle for faith as much as we value the faith itself.

We have something wonderful to share -- with a skeptical world that looks askance at religion, with a thinking world that does not want to check its brain at the door of a church, with an individualized and alienated world that is craving a community, with a hurting world that needs to know the healing touch of Jesus Christ.

It's not really hard to do. Although it can be awkward at first. But think of it this way. When you tell a friend why they should go see a great new movie, you know what it was you loved about that film. When you tell a friend about a restaurant, you know what you ate and why it was good. And we are always telling our friends about movies and food and books that we enjoyed.

Evangelism is just as simple as that. Ask yourself: Why do you love this church, this parish, this place? What has it meant to you in your life? How has God touched you here, at this altar, among these people? Why do you want to be married here, buried here, or have your babies baptized here? Where have you met Jesus here?

If you can answer those questions for yourself, you can speak them to a friend, a neighbor, a colleague, or a family member. You can give an account for the faith that is in you. You can invite them to come and see what you have found. And then you can sit back and let the Holy Spirit take care of the rest.

In last year's sermon, I said that I believed that God is calling All Saints to understand itself as a called community. That God wants to use this parish to show the world what it means to give yourself away for the sake of the world, as Jesus did.

I want to amend that statement. I believe God is calling All Saints to understand itself as a called community *that also calls others ...* into fellowship, into discipleship, into friendship, into service.

We can leave here today as innocent and guileless as Toivo and Eino. We can walk out murmuring, "What fish?" as we get in our cars and drive away.

Or we can look up and see them, schools of them. On bikes, in cars, on foot. In our offices, in the grocery store, in the line of parents along the soccer field. It's like a smelt run in the spring ... they are everywhere! Waiting for you to be an angel to them, to bring those glad tidings, to share your good news.