

**People, Not Things**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**January 21, 2018, Third Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Mark 1:14-20**

Let's back up. Let's assume our story starts three months before today's lection. That might not seem like a long time. But it is!!!

Jesus is still Jesus, but he's not yet "Jesus."

He's just a day laborer. Some say a carpenter. Perhaps a mason. And you wouldn't have been able to find much work in the tiny town of Nazareth. What good would carpentry skills do you in a place that didn't have many buildings, or many people in need of fixing or living in such structures? If Jesus was like the other men in his village, he probably walked approximately five miles each morning, to Sepphoris, and back home again. That's right, he had a commute, just like many of us. And Sepphoris was a fine Roman city, a seat of government, even, complete with a market, and an amphitheater, and rich patrons in need of workers who could build things, and fix things.

And it makes me wonder: what do you think Jesus thought about on all those long walks to work and back again? I wonder if he believed there was something more to life than participating in the completion of things, specifically buildings. Another day, another brick. And in a week or two, or even a year, a shiny new object for Herod's son to brag about. And then on to the next one, I suppose. Jesus was part of the system. Herod's system. The one that chewed people up and spit them out, all in the pursuit of more stuff: wealth, power, property, etc.

Up the road in the Galilee, Andrew and Simon belonged to the same system. Each morning, they set their boats out into the lake in the hopes of hauling in loads of fish. They needed one big catch, just one big catch, and then it'd all be okay. But the truth was, no matter how big the catch, it was never enough. Once they paid their debts, and gave Herod his due, and fed themselves, and their families, there wasn't anything left. It was like tenant farming, only with fish instead of tobacco, or cotton, or grain. And each day just blurred into the next one.

Somewhere, a little further up the lakeshore, John and James were preparing their boat — another day, just like so many before today. If it was winter, perhaps they were stamping their feet to shake off the cold, and bracing for the unrelenting winds that would batter their faces and hands over the next few hours. If it was summer, perhaps they were enjoying the morning's last few moments of cool respite — the noon day sun would be out soon enough, and its rays would beat down on their bodies, and redden their already thick and calloused skin. And we're told they were mending their nets — I'd imagine that eight hours of constant tugging, and pulling, and weight-bearing would take its toll on even the strongest rope. If only someone could mend their aching muscles and sagging spirits in the same way! In a few moments, they'd venture off in the same pursuit as Simon and Andrew — the catch!!! But the catch, even if they were lucky enough to get it, would never be big enough.

When I read today's lection, I can't help but think that not too long ago, Jesus was a lot like his soon-to-be disciples. He lived in a world dominated by a system that didn't offer much promise.

But something had been stirring inside of Jesus. He sensed that God was working in him, and through him, and with him. What's more, Jesus sensed that God was present, right here and right now. I've mentioned this before, and I will again, because I think it's a good observation: Stanly Saunders says Jesus declares a kind of bankruptcy on Herod's system, and of all systems of power and privilege. Jesus no longer chooses to participate in Herod's economy. Instead, he becomes a full participant in God's economy. And he lives as if God's kingdom, God's realm has burst into the present.

And here's how Jesus articulates his newfound calling, and his newfound view of the world: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

Here's what I think that means: There is good news — God's kingdom is not like Herod's. It's not based on the acquisition of finite things. It's based on the distribution of God's infinite love. And the only thing (pardon the pun) you have to do to participate in this kingdom is love God and love others. So take notice. And get started. There's no time to waste!

And you already know the second part of today's story. Understanding his calling, Jesus sets about to find disciples. He finds these four men, Andrew, and Simon, and John, and James, and he tells them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

It seems to me we spend too much time focusing on the verb *fish* and not enough time focusing on the noun *people*. Because to me, it's not the action of the verb that matters here. What matters is for what, or better yet, for whom the verb's action is intended.

Let me back up for a moment. Before Jesus called the fisherman, somebody had to call him. And I imagine, that one day on his way to Sepphoris, or perhaps many times during his regular commute, God's voice whispered:

Guess what? There are day laborers standing in line each morning to pile one brick on top of another. But the construction site can't hold them all. And while some will have their denarius at day's end, others will stand in the parking lot, gnashing their teeth, their stomachs empty, their hands idle, and their families still wanting. Herod has them, and you building things. But I'm offering you a life of promise, a life of something more full. Listen to me. Follow me. And I will make you a builder of people.

And right then and right there, Jesus jumped off the merry-go-round. He stopped being part of a world that put people in the pursuit of things. And he started being part of a world that put God in pursuit of people and people in pursuit of God.

Herod's kingdom values things. God's values people. So when Jesus encounters the opportunity to call his first disciples, who just happen to be fisherman, he says:

Guess what? The lake is big, but there's still a limited supply of fish. And at the end of the day, some of the fishers will find a catch and some won't. Herod wants you to fish so that you may acquire things. And he wants your worth and your value to be based on how many fish you can catch each day. But I want you to fish for people — I want you to go out and find people who will help bring about God's kingdom.

And these men follow. They stop everything and pursue a new kind of vocation. They stop pursuing things. And they start pursuing people.

It's been two thousand years, but I think Jesus is still walking that shoreline. And I think he's still asking us to put more emphasis on that noun *people*. We're all called to do different jobs or activities. Some of us may fish, some may build, some may write, some may teach, some may design, some may heal, some may protect, some may march, some may love...the list goes on.

Think about what it is that you are called to do.

Do you fish, or build, or write, or teach, or design, or heal, or protect, or march, or love – do you do any of these actions all in order to acquire more things?

Or do you fish, or build, or write, or teach, or design, or heal, or protect, or march, or love, or live, all in an effort to experience God and God's creation. Is what you are called to do, something that you do to share the best of yourself with God, and with neighbor. In other words, do you fish for people, or build for people, or write for people, or design for people, or heal for people, or protect for people, or march for people, or love for people, or live for people.

Jesus told us God's kingdom has come near. I think he found that kingdom in authentic relationships with his neighbors. And I think if we want to experience God's nearness, we too, will only find it in communities that value people over things.

Sardis Baptist Church, each day we busy ourselves with boats to push out, and nets to mend. For we have deadlines to meet, and things to acquire. And as we busy ourselves, Christ walks the shorelines, and the subway cars, and even I-485. And Christ bids us to look up from our spreadsheets, and our smart phones, and our social media feeds, and notice God's nearness.

And Christ says, "Follow me!"

May we follow. And may we find one another. And in one another, may experience God's nearness.

Amen.