

January 22, 2012 Epiphany 3

Mark 1:14-20

The Rev. Stacy A. Walker-Frontjes, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, DeKalb, Illinois

Let Your Life Speak: Following Jesus Everyday

I held the branch in my hand carefully examining the tiny waxy leaves. Was this boxwood or Japanese holly? I just couldn't tell! It was one of many humbling moments in my first week on the job as an arborist in Portland, Oregon. I was a new graduate of the Forestry department at Michigan State University where we didn't have many boxwoods or Japanese hollies because they could not survive winter in East Lansing, Michigan. Portland, Oregon was a completely different climate, much warmer, and there were all sorts of plants I simply did not know. I had the training, I knew I would eventually figure this out. But for the time being it was just hard, and humiliating, and exhausting. Thankfully some of my co-workers were patient teachers, and they helped me figure it out. They helped me make the transition from student to consultant. We ended up being a pretty good team for many seasons. Saving Japanese hollies from spider mites one branch at a time!

In the Gospel of Mark Jesus gets right down to business calling disciples after a forty day wilderness retreat immediately following his baptism. He comes with the same message that John proclaimed: The time is now, the kingdom of God is here: repent and believe in this good news. Repent means to turn around, to reorient yourself. It also means to acknowledge that the way you had been going was not the right way, and also to express that a new way of living is desired. Certainly if I had kept my ignorance of the differences between boxwoods and Japanese hollies to myself I would be clueless to this day, and would likely have made a few enemies on the crew, rather than friends. I had to admit my ignorance and seek the truth. I had to repent, and seek a new way of living in a new city and its new landscape.

Mark writes that Jesus proclaims this message of reorientation to the good news that the kingdom of God has arrived, and then he approaches Simon and Andrew to put the message to the test. "Follow me!" he cries out to them as they are minding their own business, fishing because they were fishermen. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And they do. Immediately. A similar scene occurs when Jesus calls out to James and John who are mending nets with their father. They also turn around, leaving the boat behind them and reorienting their life to Jesus and the good news he proclaims.

They all seem quite eager to become fishers of people. Which you have to admit, sounds a bit odd. Fishing is a rough business! It's rather violent—baiting, hooking, dragging into a net.

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What's that all about, Jesus? You want us to treat people this way to tell them about you? Let's look beneath the surface of these waters for just a moment: Jesus called his first followers from the place that he was from, the people that were his neighbors, he called them for who they are and the gifts they possessed. He promised to teach them new ways to use their gifts for the glory of God. He knew it would be hard work, and he knew these fisherman were just the right mixture of strength and grace. Fisherman have to be strong to cast and pull in the net, but they must also be careful and precise when mending the delicate webbing. Jesus seems to have known what he was doing after all.

Jesus still calls us to follow him. Although now we are not named "fishers of people". We proclaim a new identity at our baptism. We become a member of the body of Christ. We are adopted as God's children. We become members of the Church, which many of us—particularly if we were baptized as children—wander in and out of for most of our lives. We struggle with this call of Jesus and what it means in a world where the immediacy of the call that Simon, Andrew, James and John experienced has mellowed. One of the questions that has stuck in my head from the Great Awakening event three weeks ago was one posed to Brian McLaren (one of the speakers, a pastor and writer in the emergent Church movement see video at <http://www.seaburnext.org/Multimedia/>)

by a man in his early twenties. This young man asked how people his age might be encouraged to become involved in the life of the Church. McLaren thought carefully about this huge question, and responded, "We need to emphasize the difference between 'church work' and 'the work of the Church'." This was a smart answer key to our identity as Christians. I don't know too many people who attend church simply so they may engage in the various tasks of doing things around the church building and community: changing light bulbs, trimming shrubs, teaching Sunday School, serving as an acolyte, singing in the choir, cooking for church suppers, etc. Things actions are often fun, and certainly necessary to the life of the community gathered here. But that's not the main reason most of us were drawn to the Church. We were drawn by the call of Christ and by the promise that if we followed him our lives would be different, that our lives would be better, that our lives would have meaning and purpose. Church work is as necessary as mending the nets and making ready the boats for a fishing expedition. The time comes when the boats must be launched, and the fisher-people climb on board, for the fish are not throwing themselves onto the shore because our nets and boats look so inviting.

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The work of the Church is outside of these doors. The work of the Church is wherever the followers of Christ live, and move, and have their being. The work of the Church was in the front yard of a house in northwest Portland where I puzzled over the identity of a shrub with small waxy leaves. How I behaved in that moment reflected on who I was as a person. Who I was and who I am is a follower of Christ. And among my co-workers, over the years, they came to know who I was and whose I was: I was a Christian. And they heard the good news of God in the world through the gospel I preached with my life much more clearly than they did from those who were toting their bibles and asking with some frequency "How's your prayer life?"

I think about all of this quite a bit—you know, all of this following Jesus stuff. After all, I am a priest. And this is the world I work in. This is my work of the Church, and it involves a lot of "church work." It is perhaps more difficult for me than it is for you to hear the call of Christ to proclaim the good news outside of these doors. But I still make the effort. I take off my collar, and I walk into the rest of my life with my core identity—I am a Christian. I am a bearer of the Light of Christ. And I carry that light to the gym, to my home, to the grocery store, to the PTA meeting, to the knitting circle, to the bowling alley. Wherever I go, I am authentically myself. I don't need to shout Jesus is Lord from the rooftops, I let my life speak, and good or ill my actions are always louder than my words.

I want you to do me a favor. I want some authentic sermon feedback this week, but I don't want it today. In your bulletin is a slip of paper with two questions on it. I want you to take it home and think about these questions: Where are the places that I live? And, how am I following Jesus in those places? In other words, how are my actions speaking louder than words? This may be easy for you to answer. For some of you it may not. Give me a call or send me an email or Facebook message if you want some more clarification. Please, bring this back with you next week. If you forget, I'll have some more slips. You know, when Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James and John he called them together. He knew the call to follow him was not something they could do on their own. They were going to need each other. They were going to need help to see where it was and how it was they were going to share the good news that the kingdom of God has come. We still need each other on this journey of following Jesus. We need each other to figure out where he is, and how to get there. So I encourage you to bring back you slip so we might share the places we find and follow Jesus with one another.