

Following Jesus in His Mission

Mark 1:14-20

John Breon

“We’ll Get Back to You”

Dear Christians:

This is My commission to you—in fact, you might even call it a great commission. You are to go to all people everywhere and call them to become My disciples. You are to baptize them and teach them to obey all that I have commanded you.

Don’t forget. I will be with you always to help you, even to the end of the world. I will never leave you nor forsake you, because I love you. Please don’t forsake Me.

With all My love,
Jesus Christ

Dear Jesus Christ:

We acknowledge the receipt of Your recent communication.

Your proposal is both interesting and challenging; however, due to a shortage of personnel, as well as several other financial and personal considerations, we do not feel that we can give proper emphasis to Your challenge at this time.

A committee has been appointed to study the feasibility of the plan. You should have a report to bring to our congregation some time in the future. You may rest assured that we will give this our careful consideration, and our board will be praying for You and Your efforts to find additional disciples.

We do appreciate Your offer to serve as a resource person, and should we decide to undertake this project at some point in the future, we’ll get back to You.

Cordially,
The Christians

(from Platte Woods UMC News, 11/17/99)

After his baptism and temptation, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. His message was, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news."

Then Jesus begins to call disciples. His call, "Follow me" builds on his message, "Repent and believe." Jesus does the work of a traveling rabbi or teacher. Rabbis in those days had groups of students or disciples who accompanied them, learned from them and followed their example. An interesting difference in Jesus' approach is that he *called* disciples. Usually, a person would approach a rabbi and ask to become a student. But Jesus takes the initiative, selects a group of disciples and calls them to himself.

Walking by the Sea of Galilee, he sees Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake. Jesus says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." At once they leave their nets and follow him. A little farther down the shore James and John are working on their boat. Jesus calls them and they follow him as well. Jesus is calling these men to be with him, to learn from him and to take part in his mission.

The call to follow Jesus in his mission comes in the context of Jesus' message about the kingdom of God. God's powerful reign was invading this world in Jesus Christ. God's rule was being inaugurated in Jesus' life and ministry. God's kingdom of peace and justice was coming to change the world. God's coming in sovereign power reorients our lives. It moves all other commitments and claims for allegiance into second place. The kingdom's presence calls for response: "repent and believe," "follow me."

Following Jesus requires total abandon. We are to follow Jesus until our faith is our own. And we follow Jesus until our hearts are entirely his. The greatest day in Peter and Andrew's business was the day they gave it up. Peter was caught between Jesus and the fish—and those fish cast human shadows on the shore. Those men left their nets and followed Jesus. The call of Jesus reaches into every aspect of our lives and rearranges our priorities.

Peter could not begin to imagine where he would be going or that he would never really be coming back. But the Man and his words,

Follow Me, were so compelling that with hardly a glance at each other, he and Andrew had pulled in the net and tied the boat to the shore and started out. (Bob Benson, *In Quest of the Shared Life* 144)

This is a miracle story—as much as the healings (“rise and walk,” “be clean”), the exorcisms (“come out”), calming the storm (“be still”) or raising the dead (“get up”). Jesus simply says, “Follow me” and they do.

Following Jesus means sharing in his mission, becoming “fishers of men”—learning how to proclaim this message and help others come into the kingdom.

Jesus calls *us* to take part in his mission as well. The call to follow Jesus involves learning from Jesus how to invite others to follow and how to involve them in God’s kingdom and in the process of discipleship.

Jesus makes his requirements known right up front. He knows that small demands lead to small commitments and great demands lead to great commitments. So he says right away that we will be expected to bring others in. Part of what following Jesus means is helping others come to follow him.

You’ve probably heard some version of this parable:

Now it came to pass that a group existed who called themselves fishermen. And lo, there were many fish in the waters all around. In fact the whole area was surrounded by streams and lakes filled with fish. And the fish were hungry.

Week after week, month after month, and year after year, those who called themselves fishermen met in meetings and talked about their call to fish, the abundance of fish, and how they might go about fishing. Year after year they carefully defined what fishing means, defended fishing as an occupation, and declared that fishing is always to be a primary task of fishermen.

...These fishermen built large, beautiful buildings called “Fishing Headquarters.” The plea was that everyone should be a fisherman and every fisherman should fish. One thing they didn’t do, however; they didn’t fish.

...Imagine how hurt some were when one day a person suggested that those who didn't catch fish were really not fishermen, no matter how much they claimed to be. Yet it did sound correct. Is a person a fisherman if year after year he never catches a fish? Is one following if he isn't fishing? (John M. Drescher, Church Growth Press)

The call to follow Jesus includes the call to join him in his mission and to help others come to follow him as well. Most of us would say that's true. Our question is, "How do we do it?" Here are some practical ideas for and illustrations of fishing for people.

We get ready to "take people alive" by *experiencing for ourselves the forgiveness and new life we want to communicate*. Is our life in Christ so exciting that we want everyone to experience this joy and power?

Relationship is essential for effective "fishing for people"—relationship with Christ and relationships with the people we hope to introduce to new life in Christ. Our witness needs to be personal, sincere, warm and conversational. In the context of knowing people and their needs we share the Good News with them and become part of God's meeting their needs.

Tom, a pastor of a church in Dallas was just leaving his office one day. As he opened the door to leave, someone else was opening the door to enter. The two of them stood for a moment, practically nose-to-nose. The one entering looked like a beggar. He hadn't shaved in some weeks. His clothes were tattered. His breath reeked of alcohol. Without waiting for an introduction, he asked Tom if he could spare a few dollars for something to eat. He stated that he had no money and that he had not eaten for several days. Tom's first thought was to give him the money, but then on instinct he said, "No." The other man shot back, "You mean you, one of the pastors in this big church, can't spare a few bucks for someone less fortunate?" Again Tom replied, "No!" Then the other said, "Can you lend me just two dollars for a sandwich and a bowl of soup?" Tom smiled and said, "No, but I'm going to lunch. I'll take you with me." Before he could react, the man found himself joining Tom for lunch at a nearby restaurant.

As they waited for their order, Tom asked the man his name. The man slammed his fist on the table and replied, "That's the problem with you preachers! You don't care about me! All you want is to know my name!" Tom, somewhat startled, answered, "Listen friend, you haven't shaved for weeks. Your clothes are tattered and you stink to high heaven. But, who knows, some day down the road you just might decide to clean up your act, and I won't even recognize you. The only common denominator might well be your name." The meal passed in silence. As they rose to leave, Tom asked the man if he could take him somewhere. He replied, "I wouldn't ride across the street with you."

That evening, during a wedding ceremony, Tom noticed someone sitting in the shadows of the balcony. After the service he went up and found his ill-mannered lunch companion. He sat down beside him. It was about 8:00. Five hours later, neither had spoken the first word. Tom finally told the man that he was welcome to stay in the building but that he had to get some sleep as he was preaching the next morning. Then, on impulse, he asked, "If you could preach to these people tomorrow morning, what would you say?" The man replied, "Don't give a man two bucks. Take him to lunch" (Bob Tuttle, *Someone Out There Needs Me* 81-83).

We get to know people in relationships. We also need to *be prepared*. We prepare first by *praying*. Pray that God will give us a greater love for the lost. Pray to be sensitive to God's leading and to the opportunities to minister that God gives us. Pray for wisdom to listen to people and to speak what needs to be said. Pray for the fruit and gifts of God's Spirit to be evident in our lives and witness.

Another part of preparation is to *know Scripture*. Know summaries of the Gospel that you can use in witnessing. I like "Good News/Bad News/Good News"—"created in God's image" (Gen. 1:26-27)/"all have sinned and fall short of God's glory" (Rom. 3:23)/"all are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24), "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19).

Become comfortable *telling your own story* of how you came to Christ, what he's done for you, what he means to you.

Another principle of being a fisher of people is to *go where the people are*. You won't catch many fish in a bucket on your back porch. Not many fish are going to jump onto the shore. If you want to catch fish you go where the fish are. If you want to introduce people to Christ and his kingdom, you go where the people are.

Harry Denman was a kind of evangelistic hero of the Methodist Church. He's famous for his simple lifestyle, his devotion to Christ and his openness to share the Good News with everyone. He often asked people, whether he knew them or not, "Pray for Harry Denman, a sinner saved by God's grace." He made that request of every sort of person imaginable. Denman made no secret of the fact that he frequented bars and liquor stores. As a traveling man he knew that some of the loneliest people on earth could be found in motel and hotel bars.

In the book *Faith-Sharing*, George Morris tells about once when attending a denominational board meeting, Harry Denman found him in the hotel lobby late one evening.

Denman said, "Let's go fishing." They went into one of the hotel bars. Wanting to relate to the bartender, Denman positioned himself at the end of the bar.

The bartender came over and said, "May I help you?"

Denman reached out his hand and said, "As a matter of fact you can. My name is Harry Denman and I desperately need your prayers."

Startled, the bartender asked, "What did you say?"

Denman repeated his statement.

Puzzled, the bartender said, "Sir, I am afraid you've come to the wrong place."

Denman probed, "You mean you can't pray for me?"

The young man paused a moment and said, "Sir, I can't even pray for myself. How can I pray for you?"

With mercy, Denman responded, "You mean you can't even pray for yourself?" Conviction settled upon the young man. It was as if his life suddenly paraded before his eyes. He became aware that he had strayed so far from God that he couldn't pray for himself. Before Denman and Morris left the bar, Harry had the young man's home address, knew the name of

his wife and their anniversary date, and the name of his child. He used that information to keep up a steady stream of correspondence (96).

Evangelism is not up to any one of us by ourselves. The whole church is a witness, along with the circumstances of a person's life. The experience of Christian community can lead people to faith in Jesus and help people grow as disciples. Several years ago we went to Kansas City to see some friends from the church where I had been an associate pastor. When we lived there, this couple had taken us to see *Les Miserables*. When *Phantom of the Opera* came to the Music Hall, they wanted to continue the tradition of taking us to a Broadway musical. It was a great evening and we had a great visit with Kim and Nancy. And it was good for them to get out and have some fun.

The conversation often turned to their middle son, Keith. He was 35. Three years prior, he was diagnosed with ALS—Lou Gehrig's Disease. The last few weeks, there have been numerous videos online of people getting ice water dumped on them to call attention to this disease and to challenge people to donate to ALS research. ALS progressively destroys a person's neurons—nerve cells—and makes movement, eating and eventually breathing impossible. Keith was in his first year of law school when he was diagnosed. Not long after that, he and Barbara had a baby and named him Keith.

Keith, Sr. could no longer use his arms. He couldn't walk by himself. His voice was about gone. Because working and caring for Keith and the baby was too big a load for Barbara, Keith's parents went in two days a week to help him. People from Kim and Nancy's Sunday School class took turns going in on other days. They helped Keith get around and eat and they did some housework. Another man in the church quit some things he was involved in so he could go several times a week to help Keith with his physical therapy. People where Barbara worked gave her their sick leave so she could spend more time at home early on.

Kim and Nancy had an article from the *Kansas City Star* on their refrigerator. It was about Keith's wanting to leave a legacy for his son. He decided that since he liked electric trains so much as a kid, he would leave a big train set, complete with town, for little Keith. Trouble was, Keith

couldn't use his hands. So a retired neighbor went over and helped set up the tracks and buildings as Keith designed the layout. That kind of care and involvement is a witness.

Be prepared. Go where people are. Relate to people. *Be alert to opportunities* to share the Gospel, to tell what Jesus means to you, to serve in Jesus' name. And boldly seize the opportunities God gives.

In *Faith-Sharing*, George Morris tells about sitting on a plane beside a young executive. The successful looking executive was reading a magazine and was so intensely interested that he paid no attention to anyone. He was sitting on Morris' seatbelt, and George had to pull it from beneath him. The man paid no attention to the movement. What a challenge to engage this person in conversation! The title of the article the man was reading had to do with a religious census that had been taken in the US. Apparently, the article was commenting on this census and giving views on whether the Christian faith was gaining or losing in its influence.

After a time, Morris turned to the man and said, "My, that looks like an interesting article."

Reluctantly the man looked up and said, "As a matter of fact, it is very interesting. It says that mainline denominational churches are losing membership and influence and that only Pentecostal and sect-type churches are growing." He paused for a moment and continued, "I don't care about any of that." He raised an eyebrow and asked, "Do you want to know what I think?"

By then, Morris was aware that all the people seated around were very interested in this conversation. He replied, "I would be most interested in hearing your views."

The executive said, "I am convinced that in a few years only a tiny handful of people will even remember there was such a person as Jesus Christ."

Morris replied, "Well, if I were you, I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for that to happen."

Rather angrily, the man retorted, "What gives you the right to make a statement like that?"

Morris said, "You see, Jesus Christ is alive, and it's almost impossible to forget people who are alive. They impinge themselves upon you."

With a quizzical look, the man said, "How do you know that Jesus Christ is alive?"

How would you answer? Morris told the story of his own encounter with Jesus Christ. It was an amazing opportunity to proclaim the Good News in a public place (93-94).

Jesus Christ is alive and he's here right now. He's still proclaiming the nearness of God's kingdom and calling for response. He calls us to follow him and to join him in inviting others to follow, to repent and believe, to live in the fullness of God's powerful reign in Jesus Christ.