

## *Change the Narrative*

As you know, I didn't grow up in the church, but I was dropped off every year at Vacation Bible School. I am not sure but I think it was a free babysitting service for my mom to have some peace and quiet. It was there that I learned some bible songs that I remember to this day. Let me see if you remember these.

"Jesus wants me for a sun beam to shine for him each day. In every way try to please him, at home, at school, at play. A sun beam, a sun beam, Jesus wants me for a sun beam. A sun beam, a sun beam, I'll be a sun beam for him."

It's bubbling, it's bubbling  
It's bubbling in my soul  
There's singing, and laughing  
Since Jesus made me whole  
Folks don't understand it  
Nor can I keep it quiet  
But it's bubbling, bubbling, bubbling, bubbling  
Bubbling, day and night

And of course the one that goes with today's scripture:  
I will make you fishers of men, fishers of men, fishers of men,  
I will make you fishers of men, if you follow me.

If you follow me, if you follow me,  
I will make you fishers of men if you follow me.

In our scripture today, Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John make a costly but righteous choice to abandon their smelly but stable fishing businesses in order to follow Jesus. That's how this passage often gets interpreted, right? The charismatic teacher and miracle worker from Nazareth himself is imagined as an autonomous agent, who, called by the Holy Spirit, made a midlife career change from carpenter to prophet.

For middle class readers, like those who typically get their biblical interpretations published, this a romantic and compelling story that urges similarly middle class people to make a choice to follow Jesus rather than orienting their lives around stable secular careers and the accumulation of wealth. I have preached this passage that way before. In fact, for a good long while, I shaped my life around it.

However, I have found myself questioning, who has the luxury of making this supposedly noble choice and what is the impact of their decision to pick up and leave their families and communities? Whose neighborhoods do these well-meaning, well-educated, middle class disciples move into and who are they displacing when they do so.

When looking at this scripture, it seems to focus on the individual choice and it ignores both the limitations placed on our lives by social conditions and the responsibilities we have as part of a

community. Is this even a faithful understanding of who Jesus was and the alternative community he was calling people toward?

Jesus is identified in Mark 6:3 as a carpenter, which we might imagine as an independent artisan like the maker of Pinocchio. But the word that is translated as “carpenter” (tekton) is actually more often associated with day laborers doing large scale construction work. It seems more likely that Jesus and maybe his father, Joseph, too, were low ranking members of the peasant class.

The same could be said of the fishers Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John. Despite romanticized and outdated interpretations of this passage that depict the two fishing families as middle-class small business people, fishers were actually a part of the peasant class subject to exploitation through taxes, licenses, tolls, and trade policies by the ruling elite. They would have been on the margins of an economy that catered to the wealthy and powerful.

It's like the writer of the gospel is showing this contrast of the economically disastrous night of unsuccessful fishing and the overwhelming haul of fish in Jesus presence with a world that is owned and controlled by wealthy and powerful elite (the privatization of everything) and a world that is created and nurtured by a loving God and is freely available to nourish all of God's creation.

Maybe for these first disciples, the decision to leave everything to follow Jesus isn't an individual self-sacrifice as it is a recognition that this economy is impossibly rigged against them. They gave up on the existing highly regulated and unjust economy, they realized that had no chance within it and acted out of desperation to cast their lot with Jesus and God's alternative, abundant economy intended for all.

Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John walk off the job in this passage. They drop their nets and leave.

Since March of 2020, many workers have done the same here in the United States. According to a Washington Post article published on December 29, 2021, labor shortages have thrown a wrench into what is otherwise a booming late-pandemic economy. In November 2021, the unemployment rate among those willing to work was a 4.2%, a historic low. There are still about 3.5 million fewer workers employed now than in early 2020 before the pandemic, but only about half of those are looking for work. This labor shortage is contributing to massive supply chain disruptions and unreliable municipal services in many parts of our country.

Of course, it is difficult to compare the labor market in the highly regulated economy of first century Palestine and the increasingly deregulated labor market of today. But there are elements of the disciples economic situation that point us in some interesting directions, not only for understanding what is happening in our own labor market, but for imagining where things might go from here.

The fishing industry in and around the Sea of Galilee in the first century was highly regulated and those who wanted to fish there had to purchase fishing rights and pay high taxes and tributes from their catch. Much of the fish they brought in would be processed, at a cost, and then transported over toll roads for the enjoyment of wealthy families in the major cities of the region and beyond. While fishing families may appear to us to have been in business for themselves, they operated at a

subsistence level at best. At worst, they faced mounting debts that would force them out of business.

To help, here's a comparison. Some might say that ride share companies like Lyft, or Uber offer an opportunity for drivers to "be in business for themselves" when in reality the vast majority of the profit is siphoned off to the corporate execs and stockholders while workers pay their own overhead.

A dog walker working for the company WAG actually takes home only about a third of what the client pays, and that doesn't account for the dog walker's transportation costs to get to each job.

People who are employed in low wage jobs have been shown to need to work multiple full time jobs in order to survive. For example, one report published in SF Gate demonstrated that, to rent an apartment in San Francisco, a worker earning the city's minimum wage of \$16.32 (well above the federal minimum of \$7.25 would need to work 4.9 full time jobs.

While there is no hard data yet for why people are opting out of working in 2021 and 2022, it isn't hard to understand. For our earliest disciples, a night of fishing that yielded nothing would mean not only no fish for their families to eat, but no income to help cover their licenses, taxes and tolls. At this moment when Jesus meets Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, they would have been crystal clear that their boats were figuratively if not literally going under.

And then they encounter this former carpenter from Nazareth, himself a disaffected member of the peasant class who reminds them of the teeming seas created by their God for the enjoyment of all people. And so with nothing left to lose, they abandon their place in the exploitation of the Roman Empire and join with Jesus in opting into an alternative social order in which all may share in the abundance of the land and waters and live in relationship to all those beings in and on the land and water. This could be the beginning of Jesus work as an organizer. And this episode marks the beginning of the disciples training as comrades in that work of "catching people" – people who were falling through the cracks of an inhumane economic and social system.

In an episode of The Word is Resistance, (a podcast of Showing Up for Racial Justice that considers the weekly scripture readings through a lens of collective liberation called "Catching Our People, Margaret Ernst explains that the four fishers named in this passage are described as "koin-o-noi", from the Greek meaning "partners" or "co-operative members." While we don't know the details of their relationships to one another, it seems that they were somehow in it together, that they were sharing risks and bounty, like we saw them doing with the massive haul of fish.

That work Koi-no-noi" is closely related to koinonia, the Greek work used to describe the earliest churches. In becoming a part of such a fellowship, you would become a co-operative member. You would join your fate to the fates of the others in that fellowship, economically as well as spiritually.

So how do we leave our nets behind, our nets of comfort and tradition to move toward where Jesus is calling us to? How can our spiritual community become a microcosm of an economy of shared abundance where we join our fates to one another?

Circle of Hope, a church in Philadelphia, formed small groups that worked cooperatively to pay off the credit card debt of everyone in the group.

Another group of people who have historically faced barriers to home ownership is helping members purchase their own housing. The process begins with one member who has enough equity on their home to take out a home equity loan that will provide the down payment for another member to purchase a home. That member then does the same for another member as soon as they are able.

These kinds of experiments challenge the market values that have pervaded nearly every aspect of contemporary life. They change how we think about ourselves and each other in ways that mirror what Jesus taught about new kinship structures. Individuals join forces as part of a new collective subject with the power to challenge, subvert, or evade oppressive economic forces in the world. This frees us up to imagine new ways of being community for and with one another.

In the Spring, we, as a congregation will be doing just that. Looking for ways that our location on Woodward and Adams can be a hub for change. A place where housing and justice meet while we follow the one who called us to a different kind of fishing.

What would it mean for our church, our faith community to become an organizing body for a new economy of sharing and mutual aid? How can we preach the good news that the seas teeming with fish are for the nourishment of all beings and they can't be owned or co-opted for the profit of a few?

God is calling us to a different kind of being in the world. Let's join in and change the narrative. Let's cast our nets differently so that we will catch wisdom beyond our wildest dreams, healing to sooth even the most painful wounds, justice that means everyone will have enough, enough wealth, enough shelter, enough food, enough water, enough joy, enough for everyone, and yes, even enough for the Earth and all her creatures. Throw out your nets and change the narrative. Amen.