

# Empty Nets

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren  
Sermon for Sunday, February 1, 2009 Mark 1:14-20

Believe it or not, there is actually a place on earth called Yap. You may think you know someone who comes from there, but you probably don't. It is composed of four islands in the western Pacific, and constitutes one of the Federated States of Micronesia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federated\\_States\\_of\\_Micronesia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federated_States_of_Micronesia), best known for its traditional form of money – stone “donuts,” some as large as twelve feet in diameter.

I happen to know about Yap because my sixth grade teacher, Mr. Stodola, spent a couple of years there in the Peace Corp and used to regale us with stories about its exotic culture. He even taught us some of the language. I don't recall much, but I do believe I remember the standard greeting (if you are fluent in Yapese, feel free to correct me). If I remember correctly, it goes like this: “Humininom?”

It is a question, like our, “How are you?” or “How do you do?” Its literal translation, however, is, “Where are you going?” My first grasp of real cultural differences came when Mr. Stodola explained this to us. Let's face it – the question, “Where are you going?” seems terribly abrupt and invasive to us. But to the people of Yap, where travel is usually on foot, one's destination is hard to keep secret in any case. On the other hand, asking how you are feeling, either physically or emotionally, is something we may take for granted but which the people of Yap would feel is invasive or, in short, nobody else's business.

When my children were small there were times when I thought that they would have fit right in on the islands of Yap. They hardly ever asked me how I was feeling, but if I would so much as start walking in the general direction of the closet where our coats were kept, they would stop what they were doing and “greet” me in typical Yapese fashion, “Daddy! Daddy! Where are you going? Where are you going?” And before I could answer, they would add, “Can I go? Can I go?” (This, as far as I know, the islanders do not do.)

If I was in a benevolent mood, I would say, “Okay, but I'm in a hurry. Get your coats on and get in the car. /Now move!/" The response I got was mixed. It generally depended on how hot or cold it was, and what was on television. Sometimes I got an immediate response and sometimes I didn't, which means sometimes they got to go and sometimes they got left behind.

It reminds me in a way of this morning's text, where we read of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. After his baptism, his temptation in the wilderness, and John the Baptist's imprisonment, Jesus begins his ministry by preaching a simple, direct message: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news." And as he begins to go about preaching, he also begins to call people to become his followers and students. It is an invitation to travel with him and to learn more about what it means to be a citizen in this "kingdom of God."

First he calls Andrew and his brother Simon. Later in the gospel Jesus will give Simon the name by which he is better known – Peter. The two brothers are fishermen, and Jesus invites them to become fishers /of /men instead. They drop their nets and go. Then Jesus finds another pair of brothers, the sons of Zebedee, James and John. They too are invited to follow and they do.

The story moves so quickly. No words are spared on what the disciples knew of Jesus, or what they hoped to discover or accomplish by following him. The whole exchange is reduced to Jesus' terse invitation and the disciples' immediate, unspoken response. Jesus calls to them. They go. An affirmative response is symbolized by movement.

This account reminds us that biblically, the church /is / a movement, not an institution. The church is made up of people on the move, in pursuit of Christ who is leading us toward the kingdom of God. The church is not something static or stationary. It is not a building or a set of by-laws or a collection of immutable doctrines. It is a people who have responded to the invitation to follow, people who have in some sense "left their nets" and are headed in a new direction.

How well does that description fit each one of us? Are we on the move or at a standstill? Some introspection is called for. Ask yourself these questions: "In the last year, have I made any progress in my walk with Jesus? Have I grown? Have I allowed God to rule over more of my life? Am I more like Jesus? Or am I stuck? Am I clinging to my nets? Have I grown too comfortable with the way things are?"

How /would/ you answer those questions? It doesn't matter whether you are 17 or 70 or older. Your relationship with God is always meant to be one of growth and change. The call to discipleship is a call away from sedentary religion and a call to active faith.

Whether we like it or not, change is inevitable. Many a young couple marries with the hope that they can somehow capture the moment in a

bottle, and keep unchanged the way they feel about each other. But time passes and the project proves impossible. To the extent they manage to keep up the habits and routines of their courtship, even this grow stale and stagnant. The world around them changes, and the way they feel changes. As my mother-in-law warned my wife, “All those little quirks that you find enduring now will soon be habits of his that are driving you crazy!” And so they were, and are.

The only hope of true happiness in any relationship is to accept change, even to welcome it as a friend. Change is how life stays interesting. Change brings the challenges that evoke interest and energy. Change is the only alternative to stagnation. Without it, all our relationships are doomed. Growth is change.

The wise God who made us knows this. And so the messiah God sent is always calling us to change, to action, to movement. This does not mean that we must depart from an actual place or from the company of a particular people (though it may be and sometimes is the case). But Jesus’ invitation is always an invitation to “move on” spiritually, to leave behind those things which encumber us on the journey, as the first disciples left their nets. And it does necessarily mean that we are called to make progress in the process of accepting God’s rule over more and more of our lives. That is what Jesus is asking of us.

Leonard Sweet, a professor in the theological school at Drew University, calls it “drop everything discipleship.” It is characterized, he says, by a readiness to let loose and go. We let loose of the past and go with God into a new adventure of service. We get busy in ministries of compassion, demonstrating God’s love to those who are hurting economically, emotionally or spiritually. We let loose of our selfishness and go with God into a new adventure of stewardship, sharing out of our abundance. We let go of our ignorance and go with God into a new adventure of study, learning more about the faith we profess or the world to which we minister. Yes, the call to discipleship is a call to let loose and go.

It is a radical act, because the very essence of it is to surrender control. It is to let loose of our own lives as they are and allow them to be transformed, to be remade according to the will of God. A hymn by John Bell and Graham Maule describes it like this:

“Will you come and follow me

If I but call your name?”

Will you go where you don't know,

And never be the same?"

"Will you leave yourself behind

If I but call your name?

Will you care for cruel and kind,

And never be the same?"

Because it is so radical, we are always tempted to try to dilute the challenge, or modify the terms. We want an invitation that does not ask us to walk away from so much, one that lets us keep one foot in the boat and one hand on the nets. But we do not set the terms. The Lord does.

A colleague of mine tells the story of a plane trip to Corpus Christi, Texas a few years ago. It was a late afternoon flight, and when they had reached cruising altitude, the stewardess came around to ask passengers if they would like dinner. My colleague asked her, "What are my choices?" "Yes or no," she replied.

So it was also for Simon, Andrew, James and John. So it is for you and me. When Jesus invites us to let loose and go, our choices are limited to those two: yes or no, to go or stay. It doesn't get much simpler than that.

Even now Jesus is calling – calling you and me to a new way of life, a new way of looking at the world, a new future. "follow me," he says.

What will your answer be?

Amen.