

Second Careers

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for February 7, 2010, Luke 5:1-11

Here's a question: what do Tony LaRussa, Rene Descartes, Howard Cosell, and Mahatma Gandhi have in common? The answer? Before making a name for themselves doing something else, they all trained to become lawyers! Vincent Van Gogh, the impressionist painter, was a schoolmaster, student priest missionary and art dealer before he became a painter. Martha Stewart was a model and a stockbroker before she became a lifestyle guru and media mogul. Jerry Springer, now famous for his outrageous television talk show, was actually the mayor of Cincinnati before going into show business.

Career changing is common. One of my favorite stories of career change is the story of Albert Schweitzer, the great humanitarian and winner of the Nobel Peace prize. Schweitzer was born in 1875 in Germany. As a young man, he gained renown first as an organist and music scholar. Then, he shifted his attention to theology, and at the age of 24 received his Ph.D. at the University of Tübingen. He became famous then as a New Testament scholar, writing a book titled, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, that is still studied and debated today. He became the principal of the college he attended and seemed well-established as both a scholar and writer in theology.

Yet at the age of 30, he resigned as a professor and administrator to return to school as a beginning student. He had felt a call to become a missionary physician in far-away Africa, and he was willing to start over. He completed the seven year program of medical training in six years, and headed off to Africa, where he served thousands for decades, bringing care that otherwise would not have been available.

Of course, it isn't just the famous that change careers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that men and women hold an average of about 14 jobs by the time they turn 40. And a recent survey revealed that even 6% of respondents over the age of 50 were seriously considering a major career change. People change careers for all kinds of reasons. Some changes are essentially promotions – people are picked to advance in their companies, and re-training for a different kind of work is required. Others change because they grow tired or unhappy with what they are doing. Still others are forced to change, as their skills become obsolete or jobs are "outsourced" to another country. Yet others find themselves in mid-life, wondering, "Is that all there is?"

The Bible is full of career changers, including the disciples. In our reading today, we heard about some professional fishermen – Simon Peter, James and John – who took the plunge and began new careers as followers of Jesus. As is fairly typical in the Bible, the decision seems to come suddenly. One day, the fishermen are just going about their work, and the next day Jesus shows up to say, "Follow me!" And, bam, that's it – they drop their nets and go. We don't know if it was exactly like that. They may have heard Jesus speak before many times. But however they came to their decision, it was a major one.

Jesus' invitation obscures that fact a bit. "Do not be afraid" from now on you will be catching people," he said. Or as the older versions put it, "You will become fishers of men." But fishing and being a religious teacher is hardly the same thing. It is hard to imagine that anything they learned as fishermen, except perhaps the importance of hard work, prepared Peter, James and John for what they would do as apostles.

As you probably noticed, Peter thought at first that he was completely unqualified for the work Jesus was calling him to do. He falls down at Jesus' knees and say, "Go away from me, for I am a sinful man." Peter was just an ordinary guy, loud, outspoken, maybe a little impulsive. Chances are his religious education was minimal. He just didn't fit the description that most of us think of when we think of the qualities of a potential preacher.

I can sympathize with Peter. In my third and final year at the seminary, all of the senior students took a personality test. When the results came back, they were grouped by personality type and next to each type was the percentage of active clergy who were also of that type. Next to my type it said, "< 5%." In other words, less than 5% of all ministers had my personality type. The implication was that maybe I wasn't really cut out for this kind of work. Maybe I didn't belong in the ministry. But that's only one way to read that information. Here's another. If there are less than 5% of all ministers with my personality type, then maybe there is a shortage of people like me in the ministry!

In the end, it isn't so much what we bring to God's work, but how willing we are to let God work in and through us. Peter turned out pretty well. So did James and John. It wasn't overnight. They had a lot to learn. It took three years, and I think you could argue it took longer than that. They kept learning as long as they were in ministry.

But the main point I want to focus on this morning is that God is still calling today, calling people to serve in many, many ways, as "fishers of men." It doesn't always mean full-time, set-apart ministry. It often means something else - teaching, serving as a youth leader, helping in the kitchen, singing in the choir. You never know what is going to "catch" a soul - what is going to attract someone to faith. You just have to hear and heed that call when it comes.

Sometimes it comes as a natural development, a reasonable extension of what you like and what you already know. And other times it comes as a grand departure, something totally out of the blue - something that would make your friends and family scratch their heads a little. "You feel called to do what?"

It seems grown-ups are always asking kids, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I'll let you in on a little secret - a lot of kids get annoyed by that question. They have no idea, and it kind of puts them on the spot. If a kid was smart, they might turn the tables. When we ask them what they are going to be when they grow up, they might reply, "I'm not sure, but let me ask you, what are you going to do with the rest of your life?"

It's not a bad question. What do you think Peter, James or John would have answered the day before Jesus showed up? They probably would have said, "Oh, I'm just going to be a fisherman, raise a family, and hopefully take it easy some day." It is a pretty standard response from most people "just keep doing what you're doing until you retire."

But for Peter, James and John, everything changed when Jesus posed his challenge: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Suddenly, a second career became a live possibility, and those three found the courage to give it a try.

What about you? What are you going to be doing with the rest of your life? Have you ever thought about taking a leap of faith into something new? Have you ever sensed a call or interest in something special you could do to help God's work get done in this world? Maybe, like Albert Schweitzer, you'll have to start all over again at the bottom. Maybe like the disciples, you'll need training.

But most of all, you'll need courage. Dare to do something different. Dare to step out and find a new way to be a blessing. Be faithful and be fearless.

Back when I was in elementary school, we had a class where we used an incubator to hatch out some eggs. I remember us learning about how the chicks were developing day by day, even though we couldn't see inside the shell. But eventually the dramatic day came, and the eggs hatched. At the end of that day, instead of a dozen eggs sitting motionless in an incubator, we had a dozen fluffy yellow chicks scampering about in a cage with a heat lamp.

It isn't easy for a chick to break through that protective shell and embrace a new life. But that is what God created chicks to do. I'm reminded of something

C. S. Lewis wrote on the subject. He said, "It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: It would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad."

If we are not yet what God is calling us to be, then it is time to get busy. It is time to take action, to take bold steps toward becoming whatever it is we are supposed to be. Each of us as individuals, and this church, will be renewed and set free by people doing just that "seeking and finding new ways to serve God."

Amen.