

“Knowing What’s Expected of Us”

Mark 1:14-20 – January 25, 2009

INTRO: Today we hear Mark’s version of the calling of Jesus’ disciples. In Jesus’ day, ordinarily the pupil who wanted to study with a rabbi, chose the rabbi. In contrast, we hear of Jesus doing the choosing as he makes an offer these four fishers couldn’t refuse.

A newspaper article caught my eye this week. The by-line said “there’s more to being a projectionist than sitting and watching films.” It was the story of Sam Ludwig, the projectionist at the Rosebud Theater. There are probably many of us who love movies, who might think the ideal job would be to get paid to watch movies. That’s a job I think I could go for, except this article outlined what Sam’s job really entails. Like “working from 9pm straight through to 6am, untangling a reel of film that spilled on the floor while it was being rewound. Or the time the projector bulb burned out in the middle of *Batman*.” Little did I know that Sam’s job from 6pm to midnight finds him spending most of his time working in the concession stand or cleaning the theater after we’ve all spilled our popcorn. Typically only 15 minutes of his 6 hour shift is spent in the projection booth. So much for taking a job so you could watch the movie. Sam learned the job from the former projectionist—it was all on-the-job training. (*Journal Sentinel*, NOW, 1-22-09)

Sam may have had some inkling about his job before he took it, but I’m sure he learned a lot more about it after his first week on the job. If he thought he was going to have a cushy time just sitting back watching the movies, his expectations weren’t the reality.

We want to know what’s expected when we take a job, when we sell a home, when we join a service club/fraternity/sorority, when we say yes to being a part of a community advisory board, and even when we join a church. If we are going to be a part of a group or make a commitment to something, we want to know what we need to do or how we need to participate. Don’t tell us later on, that there were expectations that by now we’ve failed to live up to. We need to know those expectations from the get go.

When Jesus called these two pairs of brothers who’d been working in the fishing business in the village of Capernaum, I believe he was being upfront about his expectations for disciples then, as well as disciples now. “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” You currently know how to catch fish. Fine, I’ll now teach you how to catch people. Jesus says, come along and our agenda will be to bring others along with us. Jesus didn’t just call these four fellows for their personal benefit, but for the benefit and growth of those they might meet. Maybe these four guys enjoyed the camaraderie they had with Jesus, yet this wasn’t going to be a vacation with friends. They weren’t being called into an exclusive small group, but they were called so they enlarge the group of followers.

We aren’t real sure what expectations drove these four fishermen to abandon life as they knew it and follow Jesus. It’s clear that for James and John, the sons of Zebedee, they were leaving a lucrative business behind, since the story tells us there were hired workers on the boat that they left behind. Whatever their expectations, Jesus himself offered the best example of what he was calling those disciples to do. He acts as a fisher himself—he invites, they follow. He gives them on the job training, watch me, and then try it yourself.

Jesus takes these plain old fisher folks and uses them to spread the good news of God’s love. He doesn’t say, go and get skilled at this and then come back to me. He uses them right as they are. Jesus starts where people are and works with people to move them along.

I believe Jesus sees the work of inviting others, of fishing for people, as he phrases it, to be one of the basic tasks of being a follower. In Jesus’ book, inviting isn’t optional—it’s something he teaches us to do, by looking at his life. As the gathered church, inviting isn’t just so the institution will survive. It’s not just a numbers game. But it’s something we do as part of our responsibility of being a disciple. It’s the work of being a disciple and Jesus expects us to be about this work.

But I fear, that too often we operate as though there are really no expectations around inviting others to join us. Churches often make intentional or unintentional decisions

about whether they are going to grow or not. People too rarely think about extending an invitation to someone they know, to come to a church activity with them.

In a survey of twenty-two congregations in three major cities, newcomers were asked, "What brought you to this church?" The responses: 2%, an advertisement; 6%, an invitation by the pastor; 6% an organized evangelistic outreach program; and 86%, an invitation by a friend or family member (Roy Oswald, *Making Your Church More Inviting*)

Imagine that—86% of newcomers go there, because someone they knew invited them. Out of 14 new members this last Fall, my remembrance is that 3 of them found their way to our church because they knew someone in the congregation. We're not up to that 86% are we?

How do typical United Methodists do with our inviting someone to church? See what you think the answer to this multiple-choice question is. The average United Methodist invites a person to church: a) once a week; b) once a year; c) once every 26 years; or d) once every 38 years. According to George Barna's research, the average United Methodist invites a person to church once every 38 years.

If you aren't yet 38 years old, and you've asked someone to come to church, good for you. If you are 76, and you've never invited someone to church, you're behind at least 2 invitations!

Some information about pelicans may be good background for us in this whole fishing for people venture. Some years ago, a news release told of some pelicans that were fishing off the coast of California. Working in that same area were fishing boats. Those on the boats were cleaning their catch and leaving the parts they couldn't sell, throwing them back into the ocean at the water's edge. The pelicans watched what was happening and decided that they could just eat the waste without having to work for their food. So, for weeks, they just sat and waited for the fishing boats to come in and enjoy their meal. After a while though, the fishermen discovered that the waste could also be sold. When they stopped dropping the fish waste into the sea, it caught the pelicans unprepared. They just sat there on the shore and waited and waited, growing thinner by the day. They seemed to be able to do nothing to help themselves. The authorities concluded they couldn't help themselves because the birds had forgotten how to fish. So the wildlife officials hit upon a plan. They brought pelicans from another area in, to teach the starving birds how to fish!

I don't know whether the church has forgotten how to fish, or whether we just never learned it real well to begin with, but we might start with a bit of great fishing advice: Go where the fish are. We too often, sit back and wait for the catch—the people to come to us, rather than going out and doing our part. We need to be aware of people who are seeking a church home, or who may have never much thought about stepping foot into a church. And, if we think we don't know any of those people, think about your FRAN network: friends, relatives, acquaintances and neighbors.

George Barna has found that the average person comes into contact with 7 unchurched people a day. If we actually invited them to church, 4 say they would come to church and 2 would actually show up. And maybe that number would be even higher, if we said we would pick them up or meet them here and sit together. That way they don't have to walk in, not sure if they will know anybody.

We also need to think of those people we know who might be dealing with a kind of crisis or transition in their life, who could benefit from a supportive community. And whenever we get to wondering what we might say to someone about our church, maybe a place to start is to share what blessings you have found because you've been a part of a faith community. What is it you value about your church? What could this community add to someone else's life, and vice versa? How are the relationships we've found with people here and with God and Christ, important to our own lives? And once we begin to think of people we might invite, then we begin to talk to God about them, before we ever talk to our friends and neighbors about God. We ask God to be involved in this work of inviting—the work of the church, which can seem so scary to us.

I believe the church was never meant to be a small club. From the very beginning, Jesus set up the expectation for those disciples, that their work was to find others to join them.

Ten years ago, I attended a clergywomen's conference in Madison. I had helped organize the conference, and I was thrilled to see that a number of clergywomen from the Madison area that I hadn't yet met, were coming to the conference. By the time the lectures were over and we were ready to head home, four of us had made a date to get together in a few weeks, for breakfast. We gathered at a pancake house, and from that day forward, we called ourselves the Pancake Women. We initially thought we would brainstorm ideas about possibly forming a Madison area clergywomen's group. But, we gathered for breakfast, and we very much liked the other three women at that table. And, do you know, we never invited any other women to join us? We liked the group the way it was so much, that we just kept it small. Now, I think it was totally appropriate to make that choice. It became an amazing small support group for each of us and I miss those gatherings now that I've left. But, the church absolutely can't make that same kind of decision. Yes, there can be, and need to be many small groups in the life of the church, but the expectation is that we will find other people who might benefit from this experience of community, and invite them to join us.

Jesus didn't just walk by those four fishermen and wish they'd come with him, he voiced his invitation. A pastor was asked by someone in the community how it was that he had so many new folks coming to church. The pastor answered: "I preach on Sunday and I have 500 members who preach every day, and that is the way, with the blessing of God, that we are doing so well."

Hopefully you are all those people for Wauwatosa Ave. UMC. Yes, Jesus invites each of us to follow. But, there's more to it than that. Jesus expects us to tell the story and bring others along with us.

--Sue Burwell