

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, January 21, 2018 // Epiphany 3, Year B

The Gospel: Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Background and general observations

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Gospel of Mark is its brevity and sparseness of language. This account of Jesus' life does not impress with flowery and beautiful prose but with terse and sudden action. This Gospel is not meant to be savored in the salon over sherry, along with a volume of Proust; instead, this is a muscular story, meant to incite decision and to provoke action. There is something immediate about Mark's Gospel and its "in your face," matter-of-fact tone seems to state that the time for a decision is now.

Nowhere is this more evident than in this account of Jesus calling Peter and Andrew, James and John. Peter and Andrew were casting their nets when Jesus called them, and immediately they left their nets. James and John were working with their father Zebedee in the boat when Jesus called them, and immediately they left their father.

What we know is that these men found Jesus more compelling than the two things many of us cherish the most: our livelihood and our family. Somehow in Jesus, these men felt a call that simply overwhelmed and overshadowed everything else in their lives. They made a decision to follow Jesus, and they made their decision without hesitation.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. In your own words, what is "the good news of God" that Jesus invites people to believe in?
2. Episcopalians are often known as paragons of stability, moderation, and propriety. So many of us might ask, "What in the world could make me feel so passionately that I would drop all that is familiar to me, all that defines me, and all that currently provides me with a sense of security, in order to do this new thing?" Can you imagine making such a momentous (or seemingly reckless!) decision to drop everything in order to follow Jesus? What in your life is too precious to let go? What are your nets or boats, those things that have gotten you this far but that you might need to relinquish, in order to embrace a promising new opportunity?
3. What are you fishing for at this stage of your life? Is God calling you to make a decision of great importance right now? Do you have a sense that something has come near and could change everything, if you only decided to accept it? What is holding you back? What do you fear the most?

4. Jesus said the life he wanted us to see and live is like someone who discovers something of extreme value hidden in a field. In his extreme joy, he goes off and sells everything to buy that field. Or, Jesus said, it is like a merchant in search of fine pearls who, upon finding a particularly beautiful and valuable pearl, sells everything he has to buy that one. Can you imagine anything of this value?

Even if your spiritual journey is not quite a quest of this sort, has there been an experience of your life that helps you identify with the merchant? In other words, what is the “fine pearl” of your life, for which you have given—or would give—everything you have?

5. Our culture is known for devotion to diets and exercise regimes and we take these things very seriously—gym memberships, self-discipline, food restrictions. Can we imagine applying a similar passion and devotion to prayer, the spiritual quest, and our relationship with God? If we did so, would we become fanatics or simply more joyful, more committed Christians?
6. Of course, we are all sensitive to tone—it matters a great deal not only *what* is said, but *how* it is said. It may be interesting to realize the effects and consequences of tone in terms of spiritual direction, perhaps the difference in being “told” versus being “led.” How do you respond to the tone in this particular passage? Does its straightforward directive feel inviting to you, or does it invoke some anxiety? What might your response be saying about your own spiritual life, your own needs and desires?