

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 3, January 23, 2010, dedicated to Rev. Elaine Fennel, ordained and installed as a pastor of Grace United Church of Christ, January 22, 2010, and on this 11th anniversary of my serving at First Church to Susan, Luke, Daniel, Thalia and Sarah for all the days and nights we were apart in body, mind and spirit, and always to the glory of God!

“At Home in Kefar Nahum”

***I Corinthians 1:10-18;
Matthew 4:12-23***

***(Part III of VIII in the sermon series
“Windows into the Soul”)***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Do you remember the time in your life when made some important and critical decision about your future? Do you remember a moment of integral “true grit” when you did the right thing even though you knew it could be costly to your career or vocation? Do you remember a campfire, a walk by the ocean, a late night conversation with a friend or with God, in which you turned or returned to something or someone to which you felt called?

Being called to a “higher” calling, following God to do the right thing, standing with someone in what is an unpopular

position are modeled for us by “the man of Nazareth” and his seaside disciples in today’s texts. Moreover, living a purpose driven life of faith is modeled by Christ’s apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Corinth.

Becoming a leader who follows the call of God can be a lonely career path. For Jesus, I believe it might have happened on the high cliffs overlooking his hometown. Sometime in the 30th year of his life and saying to himself, “Now is the time,” Jesus must have taken off his carpenter’s apron, laid it on the workbench and climbed up the sheer cliffs above Nazareth.

There in the southern mountains overlooking the Galilee Valley, he could see for miles and miles. To the west, he would have seen the coastal town of Tyre and the blue waters of the Mediterranean which lay north and west beyond Mt. Carmel, where the great prophet Elijah had defeated the false prophets of Baal. To the south, he would have seen the city of Megiddo in the Valley of Armageddon. There on the plain of Esdraelon, he could have recalled the scenes of many memorable battles of Israel’s history. He could have imagined the final conflagration foretold in scripture. From the cliffs, he would have seen the hills of Gilboa where Saul and Jonathan lost their lives. To the east he would have looked across the Jordan Valley to Gilead and the Sea of Galilee and to the southeast to Mount Tabor - the mount of his soon-to-be transfiguration. To the north, he would have seen the mountains rising into Lebanon and Syria and beyond to southeastern Europe.

The spirit of God must have spoken in the wind across those cliffs, for the cliffs of Nazareth are place where the wind blows from every direction. The swirl and the sound must have blown away the son of God.

“My son, hear me. It is time. I have called you to be a greater prophet than Elijah, a warrior of non-violence, a king who will lay down his life for his friends, a beam of light to the

nations. Have faith. Trust in me. I will guide you through the valleys, the desert, and the mountains of Israel. I have called you to preach, to teach, to heal, and to save my people, Israel. Have no fear. I will be with you until the end of time."

Sometime in his 30th year, Jesus came back down from the cliffs and went to the synagogue to pray. Luke tells us, empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus unrolled the scrolls of the Haftorah - the writings of the prophets - and "found the place," the place where our "still speaking" God was speaking to him. He read from Isaiah 42, and 58, and 61 about God's call for him to preach, set the captives free, bring sight to the blind, free the oppressed and proclaim the year of economic justice for all!

They were all smiles until he closed the scroll, looked at them and said, "*The scriptures have NOW been fulfilled in your hearing this!*" This was heresy! They grabbed him, ran him out the door, up the hill, to those same cliffs and attempted to throw him off. But somehow he escaped and left town.

Sometime in the 30th year of his life, Jesus walked away from Nazareth and never looked back. He would have gone through the town of Sepphoris, home of his grandparents Ann and Joachim and birthplace of his mother. Down to highway in the Galilee he went. Looking east and west at the crossroad, he faced a critical decision. Should he head west to the Mediterranean Sea and life beyond - Europe, Africa and more? The west held the portal of possibilities and escape. To the east was the Sea of Galilee - an inland lake populated by Gentiles and Jews struggling to eek out a living in the fishing industry. The east was all about immersion into his call to discipleship. It was all about taking up his cross and leading his people to liberation and love.

There he stood. West or east? The decision he made at this crossroad of life, shaped the rest of human history. The scriptures don't tell us why he went east. So that "they would be fulfilled" - perhaps. Do you believe this? I do. He

walked east - past Cana, Gennaseret, Magdala - to discover his true destiny in the seaside town of Kefar Nahum. His destiny was completely woven together with his disciples and their fishing nets - Peter, Andrew, James and John. With these four, Jesus started the movement that took all the skills and natural aptitude for catching fish in nets to hooking people on the love of God. Through teaching, preaching and "curing every disease and every sickness among his people" (Mt. 4:23), Jesus and his disciples started out from their seaside location to the hills, mountains, deserts, valleys and cities spreading God's love. He was following God's call!

Kefar Nahum became Jesus' second home. It is a quite fishing village. It sits on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee - a relatively small body of water that sits in a wind tunnel in which storms can whip up in no time at all. Outside of Jerusalem, no town is mentioned as often in the New Testament as Kafer Nahum. To the west of town is the Mount of Beatitudes, where the Sermon on the Mount was delivered. Just east, is the beach where the risen Lord fixed the disciples breakfast in John's Gospel.

Capernaum is a peaceful place with a quiet presence. It is little wonder that Jesus felt at home here and made this synagogue his place of prayer.

The disciples must have felt that this man with a working man's hands, a carpenter's strength and a clear eye for what was straight or crooked, knotted or strong was someone worth listening to and following. Fishing is a business which humbles even the most arrogant and sure-fired person. Imagine how simple it looks. You get in your boat, row out a little way, grab a net, cast it in the water where you can see lots of fish and haul it in with an abundance of food for your family and for the marketplace, and head home for the night. How hard is that? Aside from the fact that the fish swim away, go deeper, avoid, evade and get out of your nets as they are pulled from the water, leaving you fishless and hungry - it is quite simple!

In that way, fishing is a lot like evangelism and church growth. It is simple, but it is not easy. On the surface, folks come, they come back, they stay. See what I mean - SIMPLE! But, folks are like fish sometimes. No, I don't mean scaly, and smelly and big eyed and slippery. That's what they are like up close and out of water. But I do mean, they can be evasive, good at hiding in deep water, good at slipping out of the nets, and great at swimming away from all the bait you drop down.

Like fishing for fish, fishing for people is a truly humbling operation. You want to believe you have all the right stuff to catch folks - the right programs, the right theology, the right worship space and music, the right preaching, teaching, and praying, the right staff and lay leaders, but it not always so crystal clear. With the change of one or more of these elements, the shifting of the cultural and theological winds, the feeling in the room and temperature, the loss of light or the seasonal shifts and inclement weather, you can lose sight of folks and they swim away. And you know, the fisher folk in the other boats aren't out there to share the fish that swim their way.

With Jesus, he knew he had the right men for the job of discipleship and fishing. He knew that the character and quality of these men was what God needed for the task of transforming people's lives. They were patient, humble, faithful, prayerful, laughter and love filled. They had a good sense of humor and good sense of themselves and their own short-comings. They knew a real miracle when they saw one. They knew what failure was about because each one of them had seen the "big ones" get away! They knew what success looked like because there were times when their boats were filled to the brim with those slippery edibles!

When he came calling, they didn't hesitate because they also knew what "God with skin on" looked like. First, they saw it in his hands - tough and worn by worn as a carpenter. Then they saw it in his eyes - honest and true. They were not

afraid to behold the light of God pouring out of this carpenter of Nazareth. When he wasn't on the water with them, he was on the shore fixing their boats - every fishing village needs a good carpenter. He knew how to make their vessels safe and sure in the choppy waters of the Galilean Sea. He was simple, clear, kind and loving. He was a prophet with a presence and a healing heart. Following him was - actually - an answer to their prayers.

Prayers like: *"God Save ME! God give my life purpose! God point me in the direction I need to go to most fully follow your will and your way."* They knew that "God with skin on" looked like Jesus.

Just 25 years later, the church on the island of Corinth had lost sight of their "God with skin on." Instead of following Christ, the church had broken into special interest groups following their favorite Christian. Some liked Apollo. Some liked Peter. Some liked Paul. The body of Christ had been split into body parts, none of which, by themselves have the gifts, graces and generosity of heart and spirit that the Savior embodies. This dissension within the church led to a cult of personalities. People following people - not God. They were all messed up.

While it is easy to point fingers at Corinthian Christians, it is harder to look at the way we split up the church in our times. We do it by theologians. Do we follow Borg? Spong? Barth? Bonhoeffer? Feminist or liberation theologians? Are we traditionalists? Or social activists? Are you evangelicals or liberals? We split Christ by labels of denominations or classifications - fundamentalist, conservative, true believers, so on and so forth.

In congregations, we break it down and get more into our groups with clear connection to certain people - but less connection to Christ. Confession gives way to back-slapping and self-adulation, and we end up looking better to ourselves while reflecting lesser images of others. In these dividing

groups we end up talking about each other rather than with each other. And we find when the church gets stuck in this rut of group, grope and gripe, where cliques and clichés become community and the unity of the church is lost in divisions - God cringes! The Holy Spirit leaves the room. And Christ cries from the cross - “Why have you forsaken me?!”

Paul calls to us to return to Jesus Christ. In him, we are baptized. In him, we find our purpose-driven life. In him we find our redemption and salvation. In him, we have life and hope!

I asked at the beginning if you remembered a time in your life when you made an important and critical decision about your future. If you remembered a moment of integral “true grit” when you did the right thing, even though you might have been costly in the course of discipleship to Christ. I asked if you remembered being called by God to turn or to return to something or someone to which you felt close.

Whether or not you ever felt it before, Christ is calling you NOW - to make decisions to put service above self, to show some true grit and do the right thing in all of your walk with him, to unify and not divide, to embrace the cost and the joy of discipleship. To return to him or perhaps to go fishing with him for the very first time. Our “God with skin on” needs his people to follow and to lead in his name. Amen.