

The First Four Disciples

Isaiah 52:7; Ezekiel 47:7-10; Matthew 4:18-22 (text)

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • February 25, 2018 (BSCC)

Beloved Congregation of Christ: Here's an email or letter that some of us, including myself, might have received from the IRS:

Dear Taxpayer

You are entitled to your tax refund now. The tax refund amount as \$651,443. You are required to follow the link below to login to on secure E-pass site with your Social Security Number and complete the required information in order for your refund to be processed. To access the form for you tax refund, please click this link:

Sincerely,

Internal Revenue Service

Sound familiar? Yes. These are called *phishing* emails, letters or phone calls, spelled with “ph” instead of “f.” Why are they called such? “Phishing” sounds the same as “fishing,” and the idea is the same: use a bait to catch unsuspecting “fish” or victims. These emails or letters come from all kinds of fake sources: banks, government agencies, Google, Apple, FBI, and police. They use names, logos, email addresses and websites that are look and sound very authentic. They come from Nigeria, Europe, Russia, China, Middle East, and from everywhere.

How do these people make money? Simple. If you follow their instructions, you will be taken to a fake website, and you'll be asked to fill in important information such as your Social Security Number, date of birth, address, telephone number, credit card and bank account numbers. These are information that these frauds can use to withdraw all your funds, buy expensive products online, and open all kinds of Internet accounts. Most of those who promise million-dollar inheritances will ask you to send a small processing fee. So beware!

But our text today involves a different kind of “fishing,” the kind that has eternal significance. Most of us, whenever we read or hear today's text, imagine that one day, Jesus was walking by the fishing boats by the Sea of Galilee. Then out of the blue, he quietly walks up to four fishermen casting and mending their nets and tells them, “*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*” Without hesitation, not even knowing this stranger, these four men left their boats and nets and followed him.

This popular scenario is not really what happened. According to John 1, Jesus had just been baptized by John the Baptizer. The next day, when John the Baptizer was with Andrew and another of his followers, Jesus came, and John proclaimed, “*Behold, the Lamb of God!*” After Andrew heard this, he told his brother Simon, whom Jesus later called Peter. Later, Jesus also met the brothers James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and all four spend time with Jesus, probably even traveling with him.

After John was arrested by Herod Antipas, Jesus thought it best to move from Nazareth to Capernaum in Galilee. Capernaum then became his base of operations for the duration of his

ministry in Galilee. Matthew tells us that this was a fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 9:1-2, where it says about the region of Galilee, *“the people dwelling darkness have seen a great light.”* So it was about a year after Jesus first met with the four disciples that Jesus called them, *“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”*

Unexpected Choice of Ordinary Men

But why would Jesus choose common fishermen to be his primary disciples? As Jews, they knew their Scriptures, but they were not formally educated by the best rabbis in Jerusalem. This has become a sticky point with many evangelicals today who say that formal seminary education is not really needed to be pastors and teachers. But those who say this would not go to a plumber for their tax returns, or to a medical doctor to fix their broken furnace. No, Jesus’ twelve disciples were schooled by the Master Teacher himself for more than three years. The Apostle Paul himself was taught by one of the best rabbis, Gamaliel, before he became a Christian. And after his dramatic conversion, he spent three years in Arabia studying the Word of God, before starting his ministry to the Gentiles (Gal 1:17-18).

These first four disciples Jesus called were Galileans. Jesus was also raised in Nazareth of Galilee, so the Jews considered him as a Galilean. Jews from the province of Judea thumbed their nose at Galileans because of several reasons. They were racially mixed with non-Jews. They worshiped in a different temple. They were not as well-educated. They spoke with a different accent. Galilee also had better agricultural and fishing resources than Judea, so the Jews were jealous. In fact, it’s likely that these four fishermen were not merely making ends meet, but they were prosperous, because in the first-century Graeco-Roman, fish was a staple and in high demand. They were not rich, but they were not poor either. This is why when the Jews spoke of Galilee, they said, *“Galilee of the Gentiles.”* When they discussed who Jesus was, they said, *“Is the Christ to come from Galilee . . . no prophet arises from Galilee”* (John 7:41, 52), and *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* (John 1:46).

Nevertheless, for the gospel ministry, theologically-handicapped fishermen from lowly Galilee should not have been the first choice. How often does God demonstrate to us his unexpected choices? How did he choose to save sinners like us? Was it because we were better and smarter than others? The Apostle Paul answers in 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 that God chose the foolish, weak, lowly and despised in the world to bring salvation so that no one might boast. Our only boast is the wisdom, righteousness and redemption in our Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel of Christ crucified for our sins is itself *“a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles”* (1 Cor 1:23).

These fishermen were four of twelve ordinary men. They were a mix of people who have the same faults like us: some were proud and jealous, some were impatient and brash, and most lacked courage, and one – Judas – was greedy for money. But when their eyes were opened after the resurrection of their Master, their character completely changed. They became humble like their Lord. They worked together in unity for the spread of the gospel to all the nations. They were patient in their preaching and teaching. They didn’t fear persecution and were willing to die for their faith in Jesus. Money became the least of their concerns.

Therefore, in the church, do not say, “I have no talents to share.” This is the reason why it is often said that 80 percent of the work in a church is done by 20 percent of the people. Many are not even willing to give it a try. Christ has given gifts to his church. He has given apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers for protecting his sheep from false teachers.

And he has given spiritual gifts to every believer. Some are teachers and administrators. Some care for children, clean the building, maintain the grounds, cook meals for events or for the sick, print the bulletin, set up for the lunch fellowship, and clean up after. Some seem to be more important than others, but as Paul says, *“But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another”* (1 Cor 12:24-25). There should be no demeaning of “unimportant work” nor boasting of “important work,” because all work for the good and unity of the church.

Their Extraordinary Call

The four fishermen were called by Jesus to be “fishers of men.” What does this mean? In the Old Testament, we find a few references to fish and fishermen. In Jeremiah 16:16, the Lord promised to bring back the Jews from their exile in Babylon by using fishermen, *“Behold, I am sending for many fishers, declares the LORD, and they shall catch them.”* And in the future restoration of God’s temple, which is the church, Ezekiel saw a vision of a river flowing from the temple. And wherever the river flows, life is restored. In Ezekiel 47:10, he sees this vision, *“Fishermen will stand beside the sea . . . a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea.”* We now know that the many kinds of fish is a picture of people from all nations, tribes and languages who will become disciples of Christ.

The call to be “fishers of men” consists of two aspects. First, it is a call to be a “disciple,” which simply means a “learner.” They were to learn the true gospel from the greatest Teacher for three years. The true gospel is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to save God’s people from all their sins. They were to learn about life in the kingdom of heaven, which Jesus has inaugurated when he began preaching, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

The second aspect of being “fishers of men” involves raising other disciples by preaching and teaching them all that their Master has commanded. Through this, disciples in turn will be convicted of their sins and come to Christ in repentance and faith. And this discipling of disciples will continue until the end of the age.

But the calling of the four fishermen, and later eight other disciples, is a special call to a special office. These twelve became the Twelve Apostles, who laid the foundation of the church (Eph 2:19-20). Their call was extraordinary, because there will be no other Apostles after them. They were given the extraordinary gifts of miracles, healing, prophecy, and even raising people from the dead. The Holy Spirit led them in putting the Word of God into writing. The Apostles in turn delegated the work of “fishing for men” to pastors and elders after them. But the gifts given to pastors and elders after them were not the same gifts given to the apostles and prophets, but the gifts of preaching, teaching and administering the sacraments in the church.

The Apostle Paul praises God for raising up the Twelve to preach the good news of salvation by faith in Christ when he quotes Isaiah 52:7 in Romans 10:15, “*And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’*”

Their Surprising Commitment

As was mentioned earlier, it was about a year after Jesus first met with the four disciples that Jesus called them by the Sea of Galilee, “*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*” They immediately left their nets and boats and followed him. But it was likely that they still worked as fishermen when they were not with Jesus. This we see from Luke 5:1-12, where it is told that they let Jesus use their boat as a “floating pulpit” to speak to crowds on the shore of Galilee. Later, Jesus helped them catch a great haul of fish – after they didn’t catch anything the whole night – and then formally chose and called them, “*from now on you will be catching men.*”

So now, Jesus calls these four disciples to leave their work, their homes and their families to work for his kingdom. What’s surprising is not that they immediately left their nets and boats, but that they left their vocations for a long-term, even lifetime, commitment. Without their fish, how would their families survive? Matthew was probably a wealthy tax collector. Luke was a physician. Judas Iscariot might have been a tradesman, so he was always concerned about money. Paul was trained as a lawyer before he became an Apostle.

All of them left everything behind. But Jesus demonstrated his commitment to them when he miraculously gave them a great haul of fish after an unproductive night of fishing. Again, this is a foretaste of the reward of a great haul of men and women from all nations that Jesus will give to his “fishers of men.”

Dear Friends: Today, many pastors come from different backgrounds: engineers, university professors, doctors, bankers, lawyers, teachers, businessmen, and even millionaire athletes. Others left their wealthy inheritance. Why would they do such an astonishing, life-changing decision to full-time ministry in the church? Because they have been called by Christ in Matthew 16:24–26,

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

What about the great majority of Christ’s disciples like you who are not called to be pastors? How are you to respond to Jesus’ call to take up your cross and follow him? You know that you have been called to be a farmer, teacher, wood cutter, truck driver, homemaker, or whatever work you have. Then, Jesus’ call to you is to live and work for Christ and his kingdom, whatever work you do, “*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him . . . Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.*” (Col 3:17, 23-24). Whatever work or career you have, you are involved in “fishing for men.”