

I'd like to start by taking the question of salvation off the table. I find it distressing how often serious discussion of the church's mission gets derailed by a myopic, navel-gazing view of who's saved and who's not. All salvation is the work of God's grace, Christ's sacrifice for our sakes and nothing we do, good or bad, affects salvation for us. That includes but is not limited to the action of accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, as so many seem willing to designate a prerequisite for God's love. All salvation comes by grace, which is God's free gift: unmerited, undeserved and unconditional. Who receives grace, and in what quantity it is received, is God's business, not ours. And for those who want to know my personal opinion on the scope of God's grace, it is this: I have an enormous hope, and equally strong hunch, that when the Bible says that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, it actually means it, and that God will not ever give up on any one of us – regardless of doctrine or creed.

Now the reason that I want this to be our starting point is precisely because I want us to seriously consider the mission of the Church. And in considering it, I want us to seriously consider repentance. And if we can seriously consider repentance, it will lead us to the consideration of discipleship. And if we can make it that far, then we'll be ready to go fishing.

Now regarding repentance, I recommend it. For me, for you, for really anyone I know or don't know, I recommend repentance. Repentance, you should know, is translated from the Greek term *metanoia* and the Hebrew term *shub*, and in both cases, it means the same thing: turn. It means turn toward God. Now the reason that I wanted to take salvation off the table from the start is I want us to get away from this idea that repentance can be

summed up with the phrase, “turn or burn”. Repentance is about turning to God, and it is a good thing. It is not a punitive thing, but rather, a life-giving thing. So often repentance is not seen as a basic, fundamental reorientation of one’s life toward God, a discipline that needs to be engaged in constantly, but rather instead is understood as a repudiation of the very people whom God loves. It is theologically wrong headed to preach repentance as punitive, you know, straighten up and fly right or God’s going to whomp you. Repentance has been an abused concept and we, the church need to reclaim its right use. When I hear that X, Y and Z are sins that must be repented of or else God won’t love you, it makes me angry, because it isn’t the Gospel. X, Y and Z may very well be sins, and may very well need to be repented of, but make no mistake about it, God’s grace is hardly dependent upon us. It would have been extremely short-sighted on God’s part to leave the fate of humanity up to our sinful, self-serving, duplicitous selves. And God is not short sighted.

So repentance is a good thing. It is a reorientation of one’s life toward God, which is away from sin, but toward God, and toward God’s purposes for us. It’s necessary, it’s good, and the gospel calls for it. Jesus calls for it.

Jesus calls for it right from the start of his ministry. He begins his public ministry preaching the same message that his recently incarcerated cousin John had been preaching: repent, the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Make no mistake about it, this is deliberate. Repentance is important. It doesn’t matter how near the kingdom of God is if we willfully ignore it. It’s awfully hard to avail ourselves of the kingdom of God if we’re too busy holding on to all our favorite sins. It doesn’t mean God doesn’t love us, but it does mean we’re not likely going to be very

useful. Whatever we're chasing, clinging onto, pining after, if it is so important that the kingdom is obscured from our vision, it's time for an ultimate reality check, time to assess our priorities and what is really driving us. It's a shame to be driven by useless motives. It's also less than what God wants for us.

General rule of thumb: if it stands between you and the ground of your being, the sustenance of your life and your hope in death, repentance is good idea.

So Jesus began by calling people to turn themselves away from everything but God and God's rule. Not an accident – you can't embrace the kingdom of God if your arms are around something else.

Now lest we get ahead of ourselves, I don't want us to miss Matthew's editorial note on Jesus' first sermon. Before Jesus says the first word, Matthew sets it in context for us: Jesus is out preaching to a bunch of gentiles, and the result is this, "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned."

Darkness may seem benign enough to us, but make no mistake about it, in the Bible, the darkness is frightening. Oftentimes children are afraid of the dark, and if we look at it realistically, it is with good reason: the darkness is unknown. We don't know what lurks in the shadows. It might be nothing, or it might be a predator. It might be safe, or it might be death. We don't know. And Jesus' first sermon is inviting us to turn away from that fear, that darkness, to come to the God who is good, the God who defeats darkness and death.

But before we consider discipleship, there's one other thing you need to know about that editorial note of Matthew's: pay attention to whom Jesus is preaching. It's the gentiles,

and this is not a run of the mill notation, it serves notice of the radically inclusive nature of God's grace. It's not selective – it's rampant. And anybody who wants consider discipleship needs to consider this. Eduard Schweizer says it better than I can:

“This brings the Gospels' introductory section to a close. Jesus move to ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’ demonstrates God's amazing initiative toward those who have never even been considered. Like the four women in the genealogy and the astrologers in the birth narrative at the beginning of this section, the gentiles stand at the end. At the same time this conclusion points to what is to come. *The example of Jesus' leaving the city of his youth and going to those who live in darkness is an ideal for whoever would be his disciple.*”¹

So, to be a disciple of Jesus is to be called to go to those who live in darkness. It is to be called to bear light to those who sit in fear and death. In Thomas a Kempis' classic, The Imitation of Christ, he begins with these words: “He that followeth me, walketh not in darkness, saith the Lord. These are the words of Christ, by which we are admonished how we ought to imitate His life and manners, if we will be truly enlightened and be delivered from all blindness of heart.”²

The disciples of Jesus, in addition to bearing the light, are recipients of it as well, that we might be enlightened and delivered from our blindness of heart.

Immediately after his sermon on repentance, Jesus turned his attention toward those who will serve him and he set to work calling some disciples. It is worth noting whom Jesus turned to. In the land of the outsiders, he went and got himself some day-laborers. And

¹ Schweizer, Eduard. The Good News According to Matthew. David Green, trans. John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1975. P68. Emphasis mine.

² Thomas a Kempis. The Imitation of Christ. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1935. P1

let me make this clear because it was as true then as it is now, while our economy historically has been built upon the labor of some class of people who are poorly paid and marginalized – from the slaves of the past to the migrant workers of today, they have not historically been afforded the same respect as wealthier, better connected folks. Things were no different then. Jesus called a bunch of Jewish laborers from the sketchy area of the gentiles.

I've heard fanciful interpretations of this text that hypothesized that because they had a fishing boat, the first disciples were businessmen and subsequently, in the economy of the first century, rich. Well, relatively so, possibly. But the point is that Jesus didn't run lickety-split to solidly Jewish Jerusalem and find himself some lawyers and preachers to start his work. He started with those unconsidered ones, those laborers in gentile Galilee. We do well to take note.

So after preaching a gospel of repentance, of change and redemption, after calling some unknown laborers to be his friends, Jesus told them he is going to make them fish for people.

By the way, just like repentance needs to be reconsidered and reclaimed by the church, so does discipleship. It means following. The root word is discipline, and it means to seek to follow the one who calls us. This is important to note. The disciples are the followers. They don't set the agenda.

Once we get that, we're ready to fish.

Let me tell you a story. I remember one Sunday afternoon when I was a child getting into my grandfather's old mint-green Chevy Impala and driving out to his brother's farm in Mint Hill, North Carolina. My dad and my grandfather were taking me and two of my

brothers fishing at my Uncle Jay's pond. I'm telling you, you haven't lived until you've sat with your sweaty thighs sticking to off-white vinyl of a Chevy Impala bouncing over farm roads. And when we got there, I learned two valuable lessons: first, for me at least, fishing is mightily boring. And second, fish have their own ideas about when they are going to bite. I was probably seven or so, and I was bored out of my mind. Hence, I was noisy. Now in the general wisdom of farm-pond fishing, noise spooks the fish. Or so I was told. Also, artificial bait was generally frowned upon. Finally, dragging a lure through the water with a reel is generally considered more effective than hanging a rubber worm off the end of a bamboo pole. However, since I was loud, bored, seven years old and squeamish about baiting the hook and lacking the coordination to handle a reel, I was banished to the far side of the pond, where, in God's great justice, or so at least I'm convinced, I proceeded to catch, with rubber bait and a bamboo pole, the first three bream. (Incidentally, I'm now convinced that in my noise and thrashing on the waters' edge, I drove all the fish to the far side of the pond so that when I was exiled there, they were conveniently waiting for me.)

The point of this little story is that the fish have their own ideas about when they are going to bite and what bait is going to get them.

Jesus sends the disciples out to fish and there is no fixed formula. There is just the message of repentance and discipleship and the promise that God is behind this and the fish will bite when God makes them ready. But there's a tendency with disciples, modern day at least, to tend to think that the church's calling to preach the gospel has to look one specific way, and if we're being really honest, it's sort of an offensive way to see people.

One theologian characterizes it this way. The mistake the churches make is to think that we can only minister to people when they are on the skids: “when they are down and out, got a crisis, family falling apart, got fired, on drugs, this and that, and in swoops the church, ‘Can I help you?’”

He goes on: “Look, the people who are up walking around and doing great, they have the same need... We don’t wait until somebody’s down and out, circling overhead like a vulture. ‘One of these days, you’ll go down and then we can help you.’ And finally, there you are up over a little general store, in one room, 15-watt bulb swinging overhead, and you’re on a bare mattress, cigarette butts floating in urine and stale beer, and then we come and say, ‘you need the Lord.’ That’s what the person needed before.”³

So if there is an admonition in our calling to repentance, discipleship and fishing, it is this: never, ever make assumptions about who does and does not need Jesus. We all do. All the time.

We all need to show the love of Jesus any time we can, to anyone we can, as often as we can. And we need to know that we need to be shown ourselves. We who bear the light are also the recipients of light. We who bear the mission are also the mission field. We need to be “enlightened and be delivered from all blindness of heart.”

I think sometimes the fear we have of fishing for people is that we’re literally trying to get someone on the hook. Great news: that’s not what it’s about. Fishing for people is about giving good news. And I don’t know about you, but some days I need a little good news.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

³ Craddock, Fred. *Have You Ever Heard John Preach?* in A Chorus of Witnesses. Long and Plantinga, eds. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1994. P40