

Sermon
Third Sunday After the Epiphany
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Rev. Victoria Scott

Readings: [ISAIAH 9:1-4](#); [PSALM 27:1, 5-13](#); [1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-18](#); [MATTHEW 4:12-23](#)

God says: 'Strive to be what only you can be', not 'Be a copy of someone else.' *'Strive to be what only you can be' not, 'Be a copy of someone else.'*¹

Today's Gospel passage brings us Jesus, in Capernaum, inviting Peter and Andrew and James and John to follow him, and to fish for people. What does it mean to fish for people? Is fishing for people about inviting them to "be a copy of someone else"? Is it about following a cookie cutter pattern or formula that pops out identically shaped and formed "ideal Christians"? Sometimes the Church has made it seem that way...

When Jesus went to Capernaum he didn't take "experts" in God's Kingdom with him. He doesn't take 12 "ideal Christians" with him and say to those he encountered "Be a copy of these perfect people". No. He empowered those who are already there. He said to Peter and Andrew and James and John "Follow me, and strive to be what only you can be..."

Last week I talked about the 3 B's, describing how for the last 500 years or so Western Christianity has ordered the 3 B's believe, behave, belong. Profess your belief first, behave in a particular way and then you'll belong. Fishing for people with this order has us asking people to be a copy of someone else.

Re-ordering the 3 B's belong, behave, believe – know first before anything that you belong, come and be part of a community that patterns its life on the way of Jesus and behave in that way, then let that open up a new vision of God and a new belief – belong, behave, believe frees us from having to be a copy of someone else, and lets us hear God say "Strive to be what only you can be". It lets us say to others "Strive to be what only you can be."

¹ HeartEdge Network, <https://alban.org/2019/11/15/sam-wells-at-the-heart-on-the-edge/>

This idea that God says to us “strive to be what only you can be”, not “be a copy of someone else” comes from the HeartEdge Network. HeartEdge is an ecumenical network of churches and other organizations that was initiated by St. Martin’s-in-the-Field’s in London. HeartEdge describes conversion as:

“...the Spirit bringing to life suppressed gifts and buried treasure in a person that leads them to find their story in God’s story.”

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Finding our story in God’s story. This is God’s gift to us in Jesus: an invitation to find our story in God’s story.

This is what it’s all about. This is why Jesus invited the disciples to follow him. Jesus says put down your nets that are a means to an end, and see that you are part of a net that is God’s story, woven through all of creation.

Jesus’s invitation to Peter and Andrew and James and John was: follow me, and find your story in God’s story, by journeying with people as they search for their story in God’s story. This is Jesus’s invitation to each of us, too.

Fishing for people isn’t the introduction of a new story. It’s making visible God’s story that’s already there throughout all of creation. It’s bringing to life suppressed gifts and buried treasure. It’s empowering people to be what only they can be...

Our passage from Isaiah brings us the theme of light, and this theme is echoed in our Gospel passage with the words “...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.” (Matthew 4:16) Light dawns when we recognize that our own story – what only we can be in the world – is woven with God’s story. We are all part of God’s story in our own way.

We are in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This week is “bookended” by the Feast Days of the Conversions of St. Peter and St. Paul. Peter’s conversion was a slow process, full of bumps, and turns, while Paul’s conversion was a dramatic and fairly immediate “turning around”. Peter is often remembered and referred to as the rock on which the Church is founded. This

speaks to firmness, solidity. It speaks to tradition. It speaks to practices that give the Church shape, and direction and tangibility. Paul's ministry was characterized by movement. A mission that took him over great distances, and required passion and commitment and resolve. A mission that found him responding to a range of situations and circumstances. Peter and Paul were radically different in opinion and practice – the two together are the picture of diversity – yet they are both honoured as “pillars of the church”. Both Peter and Paul lived striving to be what only they could be, not as a copy of someone else. They found their story in God's story as the Spirit brought to life suppressed gifts and buried treasure in each of them in particular ways. Recognizing that the net Jesus cast in the world is infused with the message – the invitation – to “Strive to be what only you can be” not “Be a copy of someone else” holds us, supports us, in the midst of diversity.

Finding the ways that our stories are woven with God's story isn't passive, and it isn't always straightforward or easy. The image of a net helps us to remember this. There are knots and tangles. The net that is woven through this life becomes torn and frayed. As we join in with God, we make mistakes. There are injustices, there is suffering. There is tending and mending to be done, and God needs us to do it! Tending and mending needs light, so that we see where the repair is needed. We all have a light that only we can shine. Where is God calling us to shine? Where is God calling us to tend, and mend?

In the fall, I installed our prayer net here at the front. Let it remind you of the net that Jesus cast in the world: a net that holds and supports us in the midst of diversity. This prayer net, with its visible knots and joins is holding invisible hopes, dreams, worries, fears, and insecurities. God's presence is like a net in our lives. It is not a net of imprisonment, but one that holds and supports us in the flow of this earthly journey. This is the “catching of people” that we are invited into. It is a catch not of capture, but of loving care and support. It is a hold that shares in both lamentation and celebration, that sees us laugh and weep with each other. A hold that has us share life's burdens.

God invites us to fish for people not as an exercise in being like someone else, but as a way of weaving our own unique gifts and treasures – our own story – with God's story, and with the stories of every person, every creature, and all of creation. May we look for ways to do that today, and every day, in Jesus name. Amen.