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Seized By a Great Idea

Matthew 4: 18-22

While I was on sabbatical last year, I started the practice of retreating to the woods for a couple of days each month for a period of fasting and prayer. I found the discipline so spiritually edifying that I resolved to maintain the practice, only now my regimen of retreat necessarily entails prayer, fasting and work. So, this past Monday, as soon as I put in an appearance at an early committee meeting, I headed to the woods with my dog Suzie. As you might remember, Monday was rather cold. In fact, about mid-afternoon, as I was trying to work amidst a cold breeze blowing leaves through our campsite, wearing gloves so I could type on my computer as temperatures spiraled down toward twenty degrees, Suzie gave me a look. Now understand, Suzie does not fast on these trips, and as best I know, she does not pray, but she does have a very expressive face, and she has a way of looking at me so I know exactly what she is thinking. In this instance, as we were shivering together she gave me a look that said, "I believe you are the craziest person on earth." I was just about to agree with her, when I looked up and started laughing. For we were camped near a small lake, and I glanced up to see a small boat of three fishermen dressed like Eskimos, go sailing by. I do mean sailing – the brutal wind was pushing that small craft across the water like it was in a regatta, even as the fisherman vainly tried to cast into a breeze that was virtually hurling their lures in their faces. I thought to myself, somebody would have had to get out of bed this morning and said, 'Boy, this would be a great day to go fishing! Frigid temperatures. Fierce breezes. And we can catch all the fish because nobody else will be out there.' I thought, somebody not only had to think that thought, they acted on it! "Suzie," I said, "you're wrong. Those fishermen are even crazier than I am."

Ironically, this little encounter happened as I was opening my Scripture to the fourth chapter of Matthew to ponder the meaning of these words: "As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Do you not find that exchange astonishing?

According to Matthew's Gospel, the very first words the disciples heard from the lips of Jesus were, "Follow me. I will make you fishers of people."

Our Lord did not invite these men to become great scholars.

He did not call them to be servants of humanity. He did not even ask them to be devotional and pious.

Wealth, wisdom, service to humanity and devotional piety would play a part in the inaugurating of the Kingdom of God. But what our Lord asks them to be first and foremost -- the job he calls them to fill primarily -- was the role of being fishers of people.

Our Lord says to his first followers, "Follow me! Follow me and I will make you fishers of men."

I do not find it accidental or inconsequential that the first people our Lord recruited as his recruiters were fishermen.

Because these fishermen brought with them a highly developed skill that would be essential to the spread of the Kingdom of God, a great relentlessness -- and a willingness to fail.

My father, who has been a lifelong fishermen and a long-time steel salesman, made the observation to me years ago that fishing and sales operate on the same principle: you fail far more often than you succeed.

Yet I've never known a good fisherman who said, 'Well, because 90% of my casts are going to be fruitless, because at best only one cast out of ten might bring me a fish, I'm not even going to try.'

Fishermen are undaunted by the prospect of failure.

Fisherman accept the fact that failure is part of the job. Even so, they pursue their passion relentlessly.

How is it, then, that so many Christians are reticent about talking of those things that matter most to them?

How can it be that we say nothing to anyone else about our relationship with God because we are afraid that our invitation might be rejected or our testimony might not be appreciated?

What kind of value do Christians like that have for the Kingdom of God?

Our Lord expects us to be people of courage and pluck who are willing to look him in the eye and say, 'Lord, we've cast the net all night long and caught nothing.'

But if you say cast the net again, we will throw it again.'

Our Lord has no use for disciples who are willing to share news of a restaurant or a movie, but are unwilling to speak of those relationships that matter most for fear of being rebuffed.

Our Lord calls us to be fishers of people, fishers who are willing to try and fail.

Our Lord can use those kinds of people.

But people who keep their silence because they are discouraged by failure are of no use to God's Kingdom.

My daughter Clara has some rather bizarre television tastes.

I can understand a teenaged girl wanting to watch *America's Top Model*.

But why does a girl who doesn't cook get hooked on the so-called reality show *Top Chef*?

I find her devotion to that show ironic at best. But here's the one that really gets me:

I think maybe her favorite show of all is *Deadliest Catch*. Do you know what *Deadliest Catch* is about?

It's about these guys in Alaska who go fishing for Alaskan king crab.

The weather, as you might imagine, is horrendous. The hours are extreme and intense.

The pace of work is frenetic. And all of these factors combine to make fishing for Alaskan king crab the most dangerous and deadly vocation in America. So why do these people do it?

Don't tell me that they do it for the money. There are a thousand easier ways to make a living.

Why do these people endure horrific conditions, life threatening circumstances, incredibly stressful hours?

It is because they are fueled by a fierce inner fire. They are driven by a strange internal compulsion.

They are enchanted by the idea of pursuing these overgrown crustaceans!

They find something thrilling in putting their lives in this perilous pursuit, even if it costs them their lives.

The behavior of those Alaskan crab fishermen helps me understand the next verse in this encounter.

Jesus says to these fishermen: "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people."

Then the Scriptures say, "Immediately, they dropped their nets and followed him." Why?

Because they were seized by a great notion! They were driven by a strange, internal compulsion.

They were enchanted by the notion of becoming recruiters for the cause of Christ!

They were seized by a notion that they could use their lives as a way to draw others into God's Kingdom, and that notion so captivated and energized them that they threw down the life they had known and followed.

Anyone who is called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is called to be seized by a great notion.

Think about Peter and John. Think of them after Jesus' resurrection and ascension,

when Peter and John are now the leaders of the church and are hauled into court for preaching the Gospel.

Think of them on one side of the dock.

None of us who have a realistic picture of Peter and John can harbor any illusions about them.

They were exactly what Luke said they were, "ignorant and unlearned."

On the other side of the dock stood the best and brightest legal minds of Judea,

people of talent, education, wealth and social upbringing.

If there had been a television in that Jerusalem courtroom only a fool would have suggested

that the future belonged to those uncouth fishermen. Yet it did!
Why? Because they were willing to be seized by a great idea.
They were willing to be used by the living God.
They were willing to give their lives in the pursuit of being recruiters for God's Kingdom.

You don't have to be a great person to be seized by a great idea.
Simon Peter is not a great person. John, son of Zebedee, is not a great person.
The Gospels consistently depict both men as stupidly unable to grasp some of the Master's simplest ideas.
When they express an opinion, they are as often wrong as right. These are not extraordinary men.
Their SAT scores were below average. Their teachers would have marked them as low achievers.
But Peter became St. Peter. John became St. John. Why?
Because these two rude, ignorant men were willing to be seized and used by God's great idea,
and thus they helped ignite the most cataclysmic social change the world has ever known.
As fishers of people they patterned for all Christians to come what is to be our primary and basic purpose.

Some years ago Tom Peacock gave me an anthology of Charlotte writers entitled, "*No Hiding Place*," in which Tom's work is included. He advised me, "If you don't read anything else in the book read page 32." Naturally, that was the first place I turned.

It was an article written in 1957 by Kays Gary about Dorothy Counts, the first black student to attend an all-white public school in Charlotte. This is what Gary wrote: "A head needs no face for expression. The way it is carried upon the neck tells all.

If it is too high it shows defiance.

If it is too low and twists from side to side with a forward thrust of the neck it is full of shame. Between these two extremes is a posture of dignity and confidence and a certain blend of humility and pride.

And that is the way she carried her head. They spat, and she was covered with it.

Spittle dripped from the hem of her dress. It clung to her neck and her arms and she wore it.

They spat and they jeered and they screamed. A boy tumbled out of the crowd and hit her in the back with his fist. Debris fell on her shoulders and around her feet.

And the posture of her head was unchanged. That was the remarkable thing.

And if her skin was brown you had to admit that her courage was royal purple.

For how many of us could have taken that walk to and from that school?"

How many of us could have taken that walk to and from that school? Could you have taken that walk?

Before you say no, I suggest to you that Dorothy Counts was an ordinary young woman.

She was as ordinary as Peter or John. She was not a genius or a diplomat or a saint.

She was an ordinary person seized by a great idea.

She had been captured by a notion: 'I am going to live my life in such a way that it makes a statement.

I am going to live my life in such a way that I change the way you think about me.

I am going to live my life in such a way that I change the way you think about my people.

I am going to live my life in such a way that I change the way you think about who is and who is not a child of God.'

She was an ordinary young woman, but she showed extraordinary courage, grace, beauty, and power because she lived seized by a great idea, and her life made a statement.

My friends, when you hear the word, "evangelist," what comes to your mind is the image of someone narrow, bigoted, and fanatically warped.

But the word "evangelist," describes a role you and I are meant to fulfill.

An "evangelist" is a person who spreads good news.

We are children of a Christ who fills us with Good News and instructs us to share it.
The word “evangelion,” upon which “evangelist” is based,
comes from a word meaning, “good angel.”
You and I are meant to be angels of good, spokespeople for happy tidings.
If we think of the image of evangelists as narrow and bigoted, it is our responsibility to change the image!
We are to live in such a way that we change the way people think about Christians.
We are to live in such a way that we change the way people think about God.
We are to live in such a way that we change the way people think about God’s community,
which is a banquet table of grace, open to every single person on earth.

The old preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick had a friend who was a professor at a men’s college,
a man who had watched generation upon generation transition from adolescence into adulthood,
and one day Fosdick asked him to identify the distinguishing mark of that transition.
The professor offered this extraordinary answer:
“When a young man comes onto campus, he comes saying, ‘This is mine. This belongs to me.’
Such is the voice of a child.
But when a young man moves into adulthood, he begins to say, ‘I belong to that.’”
The mark of true adulthood is to feel seized by a great enterprise,
a movement transcendent and wondrous that causes us to say, ‘I belong to that.’
As Christians, we are people who say, “I belong to Christ. I belong to Christ’s Kingdom.
And I must live in such a way as to invite others to belong to that Kingdom, too.”

My friends, let me just remind you of something basic to your faith.
When the Lord called you to become a Christian disciple,
he didn’t say to you, ‘Follow me, and I will put you on the Finance Committee.’
he didn’t say to you, ‘Follow me and I will put you on the Mission Action Committee or Family Life.’
He didn’t even say, ‘Follow me, and I will put you on the Membership Committee of St. John’s Baptist Church.’
No! What our Lord says to us is, ‘Follow me, and I will put you on the
Membership Committee of the universal, cosmic, eternal Kingdom of God!’
Our Lord says, I call you to be fishers of people!
Which means, our Lord says, that I call you to be smart – for fishermen are not dumb!
Great fishermen study lake depths, currents, temperatures, brush, terrain, tides and lures.
Great fishermen study the habits and character of their fish.
So, too, we are to study the habits and character of human beings and to let them know
that the fact they live and love and laugh and learn is not happenstance.
All that they call their life is a gift!
And we are to say to them, ‘Behold, I can introduce you to the Giver.’

Our Lord walks past our lives and finds us, whatever we are doing, whatever is the nature of our nets,
and calls us: “Follow me! Become a fisher of people.”
It is our privilege and our responsibility to respond with all that is within us.

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