

Cat Goodrich  
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL  
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Mark 1:14-20

My nephew Wilkes loves to fish. At 12 years old, he has discovered a deep well of patience and determination that astounds his family. He will rise early in the morning and happily sit for hours, waiting for the perfect catch. I think he partially loves just being outdoors, being quiet, being near the water. But part of the fun, of course, is the gear. Anyone who has ever heard Rick Shelton talk about fly fishing understands that the gear is important. It is to be pondered and planned, acquired with great care and intention. Rods and flies, tackle and line – there's always another new fly to tie, another kind of bait to try.

Wilkes, aspiring fisherman, also loves to watch fishing shows on tv. That is how he introduced me to the phenomenon called Hillbilly Handfishin'. Hillbilly Handfishin is a reality tv show where some good old Oklahoma boys take city folk out to the country to learn the art of catchin' catfish with their bare hands. And feet. The hosts delight in the squeamish terror that handfishin evokes in city dwellers, who understandably are somewhat reluctant to stick their hand or foot into a muddy aquatic hole in the hopes of getting a catfish to bite it. But that is the art of handfishin.' As you can imagine, it can be quite the spectacle – I think it's an evolutionary imperative that you hesitate before putting your hand into a dark, muddy hole where a creature waits to chomp on it.

Contrasted with the elegance and zen of fly fishing, the tackleboxes and gear of rod fishing, handfishing is a crazy way to catch a fish. It runs counter to all the prevailing wisdom. Kindof like an itinerant carpenter declaring that a revolution has happened, God's kingdom has come despite all appearances to the contrary. Crazy like that carpenter calling out to fishermen, inviting them to fish for people.

See what I did there?

Mark's gospel is spare, a rapid re-telling of Christ's life and ministry. We don't get much detail, just the bare facts. John was arrested, and that pushed Christ into the spotlight – compelling him to declare good news! The time had come, God's reign was here. Maybe the nature of John's arrest and subsequent beheading pushed Jesus over the edge. Maybe Jesus's anger and frustration gave him the chutzpah, the courage to denounce Rome by proclaiming allegiance to a kingdom invisible to the naked eye yet present just the same. Maybe Jesus had just had enough, or it was just the time God intended. Whatever the reason, Christ set out and began to build a movement by calling people to repent, to believe the good news, and to follow him.

And, people do. Just like Nathaniel and Philip last week, Simon and Andrew, James and John are compelled to follow Jesus even though they don't know him, and they haven't

seen him do anything. No one is healed, no water turned to wine, no loaves and fishes multiplied. He just calls to them and they follow – even though they don’t know where he’s going or why, beyond to fish for people.

What does that mean, to fish for people? It’s often heard evangelistically – catching more disciples for Jesus. But Ched Meyers, in his brilliant political analysis of the gospel of Mark, suggests that fishing for people was actually a loaded phrase that evoked a similar phrase used in the Hebrew scriptures. Meyers observes that Galilee’s fishing industry was growing around the time Jesus would’ve been preaching, but the fishermen didn’t see any of the profits. They were at the bottom of a towering economic hierarchy. Exploited. Frustrated. Just scraping by while others profited from their hard work. So by calling the fishermen to fish for people, Jesus alludes to the Jewish prophets who used that term to decry the exploitation of poor workers by the powers that be. If Meyers is right, Jesus is calling the fishermen to join a revolution. One that they’ve wanted for a long time. That might explain why they’re so quick to hop to.

But really, Mark doesn’t tell us much about why Simon and Andrew, James and John are so quick to jump out of the boat to follow Christ. The gospel just says that they go “immediately.” *Immediately*. This is a motif of Mark’s – everything happens quickly and urgently as Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God. But I learned something recently that made me think differently about Christ’s call and the disciples’ immediate response. Because it doesn’t make sense, does it? That they would leave everything they knew: their work, their family, everything – to follow a guy they’d never even met. It runs counter to all the prevailing wisdom.

Neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky has written a book about human motivation, and I heard him responding to a question about what makes humans good – explaining what people might be thinking when they do heroic acts.<sup>1</sup> Have you ever wondered that? Maybe you know of a person who has rescued another from mortal peril without thinking of the risk to their own life. The man who jumps in front of an oncoming train to pick up a person who has fallen on the tracks. The woman who jumps into a frozen lake to save someone who fell through the ice. Even people who sheltered Jews from the Nazis – what motivates someone to risk their life to save someone they don’t know?

One might guess that empathy plays an important role in our motivation. That the more sympathetic or empathetic we are, the more likely we are to be the hero. But that isn’t the predictor. In fact, when you hear someone who made the heroic decision to run into the burning building, they can’t often explain what they were thinking. The response was immediate, automatic. Helping was just the only option – it’s what you do, it’s ingrained in the very fabric of who they are. So when the moment of crisis comes, they’re jumping into the lake before they even realize what they’re doing.

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<sup>1</sup> Sapolsky, Robert. *Behave: The Biology of Humans at our Best and at our Worst*. Penguin Press, 2017. I heard him on the NPR program *Radiolab*, “How to be a Hero.” hosted by Jad Abumrad and Robert Crulwich, aired January 9, 2018 and accessed at [www.radiolab.org](http://www.radiolab.org).

It's like they have an instinct for doing good, for helping others. Helping isn't a logic proposition, you can't reason your way there, because you'd never get there, our desire for self preservation is too strong. In fact, Sapolsky says people risk their lives on behalf of another because helping others has become an implicit procedural behavior. They don't have to think about it. They've practiced caring for others over and over, so their body knows what to do when it sees someone in crisis – they respond immediately, they don't have to stop and think about it. It's written into their muscle memory.

So Simon and Andrew, James and John. Leaving behind everything they knew and loved to follow Jesus was totally illogical. When you think about what happened to John the Baptist and knowing what was in store for Christ, it was downright dangerous. But these guys heard Christ's call and *immediately* they left their boats and went to follow him. It was instinct, an innate drive to respond to God's invitation – ingrained in the very fabric of who they were. Maybe they'd practiced listening for God's call for so long, it was just implicit that they'd respond to Jesus when he called them. They don't stop to think about it. Or, maybe because they had been practicing resistance to the exploitative power of the Roman empire in small ways every day, they were ready to jump at any opportunity to further the movement. It was a huge risk to follow Jesus. They couldn't reason their way into it. They just had to go with their gut – and before they knew it, they'd jumped out of their boats to follow him – to fish for people using nothing but their hands, their hearts, and their voices.

We can build muscle memory just like the disciples. Through our worship, our prayer, our learning, our service and work for justice, listening for the call of God becomes instinctual, ingrained into who we are. By practicing resistance to the exploitative power of the empire in small ways each day, we strengthen our capacity to jump out of the boat, to build the kingdom of God. Loving God and loving neighbor becomes the only option, it's just part of who we are. Implicit, innate, we are out of the boat and running to catch up with Jesus immediately, before we even know what's happened.

Your session and team leaders have spent the past two months seeking to refine our understanding of God's vision for our church and planning for the year ahead. In prayer and conversation, we've discerned that we're called not just to speak up, reach out, and build bridges, but to turn up the volume on our message of a God of love and justice in Birmingham. Because we believe that's a message that needs to be heard – on both sides of the mountain, in every neighborhood, with all kinds of people. We believe God is leading us to build a church and a community that is more inclusive and more diverse, with partners that share our sacred space and share our vision of a more just world. Our vision involves risk – following Christ almost always does. It means leaving some of the old ways behind, jumping out of the boat to catch up with the leading of the Spirit. Our weekly worship, our prayer and spiritual lives, fellowship and advocacy are building our muscle memory, making us into the disciples we are called to be: disciples who are willing to risk whatever it takes to speak up, reach out, and build bridges of inclusion, love, and justice in a world that desperately needs them. And that is very good news, indeed.