

3rd Sunday after Epiphany Year B—Mark 1:14-20

Jesus approached two pairs of brothers—Simon and Andrew and James and John and simply said, “Follow me.” Immediately they left their nets, for they were fishermen, and followed.

There were many fishermen in Galilee in Jesus’ time. Josephus, who was for a time governor of Galilee and who was a great historian of the Jews, tells us that in his day there were 330 fishing boats sailing on the waters of the Sea of Galilee. Ordinary people in Palestine had very little meat in their diet, but fish was their staple food. Fishermen were very ordinary people and when Jesus called the brothers, they were just doing their ordinary work—catching fish and mending nets. However, lest we think that the fishermen were very much on the margins of society and therefore had nothing to lose by following Jesus, there is more to notice about them. One is that they had employed hired hands, so they must have been reasonably prosperous. We also know that Peter was married and had his mother-in-law living in the household. Peter and his wife may very well have had children. So Jesus was not calling just some naïve youth following a kind of cult. He called established members of society.

Jesus said “Follow me!” and the fishermen followed. Well, we can’t be sure that they had never seen Jesus before. Perhaps they had been among the enthralled crowd that would listen to Jesus. Perhaps they would linger on long after others had left. They had felt the magnetism of his presence and the power of his gaze.

“I will make you fish for people,” Jesus declared. Notice Jesus also offered the fishermen a task to do—not a life of ease, but something that would require giving their all. They were to become evangelists. St. Francis expressed the importance of evangelism in this way: “Proclaim the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” I have no doubt that the reason the fishermen could follow Jesus so instantly—whether they had heard him before or not—was that Jesus was a living embodiment of what he taught.

I would like to tell you three stories of people whom I believe proclaimed the Gospel at all times, whether they were Christian or another religion.

Robert McCahill was a priest, the only Roman Catholic in Kishorganj, Bangladesh. He lived by himself in a hut on the edge of town. The law in this Muslim

town forbids any proselytizing, any preaching or public proclamation of the Gospel. Father McCahill could not even offer a mass. He was allowed only to live in Kishorganj.

So he did, by spending his days serving his Muslim friends and neighbors. He provided the sick with medicines. When they needed it, he helped them get to a hospital. He gave food to the destitute. He was a familiar figure in Kishorganj, going to the homes of those too sick to come to him.

Father McCahill was also a regular at a small restaurant in town. The owners were used to seeing him invite beggars from the street outside to come in and share a meal at his table. What they couldn't figure out is why this Christian priest and foreigner, who could not offer a mass or talk about Jesus, poured tea for these beggars as if he were their hired servant.

Father McCahill could not talk about Jesus. When someone asked, he responded with a few words only. He told the seeker what St. James wrote in his epistle, that "in the eyes of God, true religion is helping those in need." That made sense to his Muslim friends, who had heard the same thing in the Koran. Maybe that is why, as he walked the streets of Kishorganj, Father McCahill was greeted as "Bhai Bob", brother Bob.

Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.

Mahatma Gandhi preached and walked the way of peace in India during the days of India's struggle for independence. Late in Gandhi's life, as independence from Britain was achieved, bitter civil war broke out between Hindus and Muslims. Distressed by the continuing fighting of his brothers and sisters, Gandhi went on a fast, determined not to eat until the fighting among fellow Indians stopped. As the fast went on, Gandhi became so weak he could hardly lift himself from his pallet. A fellow Hindu burst into his room, afraid the great man would die. In tears the man begged Gandhi to give up his fast. During their conversation, the man confessed to Gandhi that he was in torment and hell. In his own anger with Muslim neighbors who had killed a Hindu in the civil war, he had grabbed a little Muslim boy and in retaliation killed him by smashing his head against a wall. Gandhi whispered, "I know a way out of hell. Find an orphan, a young boy whose parents have been killed in the fighting. Take him into your home as your own. Only be sure to raise him as a Muslim."

Proclaim the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.

Finally, I have the story of a missionary whose name I don't know. The missionary was shipwrecked at sea and washed up at the edge of a remote village. Half dead from injury and exposure, he was taken in by the villagers and nursed back to health. For the next twenty years, he lived in the village. During that time, he preached no sermons. He neither read the Bible nor taught it to anyone. He made no personal claim of faith. But when the villagers became sick, he attended them as they had attended him, sometimes long into the night. When people were hungry, he shared his own food with them. When they were lonely, he was available to talk and listen. A well-educated man, he spent much time tutoring the uneducated.

After twenty years had passed, other missionaries came from the sea to the village and began talking to the villagers about a man named Jesus. And the villagers said, "Oh, we know him. He has been living here for twenty years. We'll take you to meet him."

So what does Jesus ask of us? "Proclaim the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."