

**No Questions Asked**  
**By Klaudia Smucker**  
**Based on Mark 1:14-20**

When I was a little girl, I loved to sing the song, “I will make you fishers of men.” Let’s sing that song. Let’s sing it like we’d sing it in Sunday school. I never knew what the song meant, but it was a catchy tune and we sang it with gusto. Fishing for people sounded like fun! But as I read this text as an adult, I found it terrifying. When Jesus called, did they really just drop their nets when he wiggled his finger and said, “Follow me?” Didn’t the disciples have questions, like “Do you mind if I run home quickly to tell my wife that I’ve quit my job and won’t be bringing home supper?” “Hey Dad, you don’t mind us leaving the rest of the day’s work for you to do, do you?” I wonder how that went over? And I wonder if James and John’s mother said, “Just because Simon and Peter followed doesn’t mean

you have to! If your friends wanted to jump off a bridge, would you do that too?”

I am generally not a risk taker. When Joy Sutter contacted me about Bally, I spent a lot of time in prayer and in conversation with people I trusted, including Bob, about how to discern if this was God’s call. I eventually discerned that it was. But I am most grateful to Bob, who trusted God’s voice to me. He didn’t know that Everence would plan on keeping him. He was willing to look for something once he got here. Two days before I made my announcement to the congregation that I was leaving, he talked with his boss. Some people thought he was crazy, taking that risk during a recession.

Diving into the great unknown is not my style. Jesus would have been in the next town before I decided anything. I swam in the deep end once as a college student, under the patient direction of Paul Fry, but I still wasn’t

comfortable in deep water. Many years later, I signed up for beginning adult swimming lessons. With another patient teacher, I had gotten comfortable swimming the length of the pool, but there was one thing yet that I had to do to pass basic swimming. I had to dive in, head first, hands pointed down in front of me. I stood there for a very long time. As the clock ticked, I finally turned to the college student teaching the class, and I said, “Push me.” He said, “I don’t think I’m allowed to do that.” I said, “If you push me, you get to go home and I pass this class. It’s a win-win.”

Jesus doesn’t push anyone in this story. He issues a simple command. Follow me. And he leaves it at that. There is no begging or bribing involved. No sleek consumer packaging. It’s the hearer’s decision whether or not they’re going to jump in with total commitment without knowing everything. Mark 1:14 says, “After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee and told the good news that comes from God. He said, ‘The time has come!

God's kingdom will soon be here. Turn back to God and believe the good news.' " Jesus announces God's kingdom, a kingdom that will transform lives and demand repentance and risk. It will require faith without knowing all the answers or doing all the research before you get started. He wants people to notice that God is among them. God is already at work as he gestures and calls out to four fishermen and asks for their help in carrying out the work of the Kingdom. There is no obvious conversation. There are no job descriptions or benefits. We are reminded that Jesus' predecessor John was already arrested. This call and this decision may be more dangerous than glorifying.

Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is here. Repent and believe in the good news!" Mark writes, "This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness that it was time to prepare the way of the Lord, and Jesus came and said it was

here. Wherever Jesus was active, whenever the gospel was preached, the reign of God drew near to the hearers, calling for a decision.<sup>1</sup>

What does all of this mean for us? Thank God, it doesn't mean that we have to be perfect or have it all together before we follow. If we look at the disciples' journey with Jesus, we can breathe a sigh of relief. James and John and Peter and Andrew responded quickly, but they also faltered frequently. Mark is honest when it comes to the disciples' inconsistent following. They were befuddled and confused, fought among themselves, and missed the point of his teachings. James and John fought for status and high positions. Peter quickly recognized Jesus as the Messiah, but couldn't bring himself to accept a suffering Messiah. None of the four who responded enthusiastically and immediately were present when Jesus was crucified.

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1957), 256-258.

I've heard many preachers put emphasis on the decision to follow Jesus. Their main interest is in getting the person saved from hell and damnation. Other preachers have separated the message from the messenger, giving value to the ethics of Jesus' teachings and his radical attitudes toward women, the sick, and the poor. In Mark's opening statement, the two cannot be separated. "This is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." When the message is separated from the messenger, we do both a disservice. But this makes all of it a lot harder. It takes a leap of faith to say, "I'm going to follow you even though I don't exactly know who you are or understand your big picture." It takes a lifetime of failures and successes to learn what it means to follow the Christ as a servant, to sit at the table with those who are different, and to be willing to say as the psalmist did, I abandon myself into your hands. It takes incredible courage to follow when it means risking, being willing to give up

control to a higher power, and a road that will demand sacrifice-the road to the cross.

For those of us who marry, most of us jump in without full knowledge of how our vows will test us. When I made that vow, I took it seriously and still do. But it wasn't until we both experienced failures and successes in our relationship to each other, that we also began to understand the importance of commitment, and the meaning of forgiveness, grace, and the lifetime it takes to work on it all.

Life is complicated enough as each of us tries to live as best we can and in our own ways. The more people we add to our circle, the more complicated it becomes. As we meet and spend time with others, we will also learn the good and bad about ourselves. This is what I hope we remember as we become fishers for people. That it's not so much about me or you, who we are, what degrees or expertise we have, even what our

theology is. When we focus only on catching fish, we lose sight of the message that as long as this world turns on its axis, there is work to do in the Kingdom. When we focus only on ethics, or right living, it's easier to see the whole thing as a system of beliefs that don't demand anything from our heart.

In "A Circle of Quiet," Madeline L'Engle wrote about her agnostic days. She enjoyed and attended church, but thought the idea that God could pitch his tent among humans was absurd. She talked to many ministers and theologians. She received all kinds of theological books, and written apologetics on the Christ. She read them all, but their easy answers and confident arrogance pushed her away further. She said, "They were eager to convert me. They explained everything. For every question I asked, they had an answer. They tried to reach me through my mind, or guilt, depending on the person." But when she experienced a crisis in her own family, the

people in the church that she attended occasionally, responded in love. For once no one was trying to convince her of anything, and yet this is what convinced her. She wrote, “I have seen love in action, and that was all the proof I needed.” This is the hook that caught her-not the books, not the forums, not the impressive degrees.<sup>2</sup>

Most Bible translations use the phrase “I will make you fish for people.” Sadly, some pastors, people, and churches do seem to emphasize getting out there and catching as many people fish as possible as the main goal. Once you have the fish, there is no plan for what to do with them. They’re left to flounder, without a safe, nurturing tank full of other fish. Ted Smith, in his commentary on this, says that the better translation is, “I will make you become fishers for people.” He says that “I will make you fish,” becomes one more activity that we do. But when we are willing to learn to

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<sup>2</sup> Madeline L’Engle, *A Circle of Quiet*, 1972, HarperSanFrancisco, p. 242-243.

become fishers, we embark on a journey with a different premise.<sup>3</sup> We embark on the journey as people willing to learn. Learn from the fish we catch, and learn from the master fisherman.

When I tell people that I am a pastor, sometimes they feel the need to tell me how they are spiritual but not religious. Some believe in Jesus, but gave up on the church a long time ago. Church was messy or hurtful, cumbersome, and full of hypocrites, depending on their experience. “Yes, it is all those things,” I say. “It’s like being in a family.” You can’t choose who comes in those doors, and decides to be part of us. Some of us are like the oldest child, who likes to have everything just so, or the middle child, who tries to keep the peace, or the baby, who seems to be everyone’s favorite. Working it all out can be entertaining at best, and nasty at its worst. As we continue to study the book of Mark, I hope you notice that

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<sup>3</sup> Ted A, Smith, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol.4*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors; Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, pg. 289.

even the messing up, the miscommunication, and the squabbling can be an opportunity to learn and grow. That is one of the many differences between being spiritual and being in Christian community. In Christian community, we occasionally stop and remember that repenting and believing and participating in Kingdom work are not exclusive goals. We are doing one or the other, hopefully on a daily basis. In Christian community, we stop and remember that when someone is in trouble, we love them, we forgive them, we pray for them, and we feed them.

I stand before this congregation full of people I know and love. I know, because I have walked beside you, that none of us are immune to sin, sadness, despair, mental health problems, ongoing marriage and family issues, and physical illness. I know there is suffering in this congregation. Somehow, you keep the faith.

What inspires me over and over again is that in spite of whatever is going on in your lives, or in this church, your commitment to follow Jesus remains. You come here week after week in the midst of whatever life is throwing at you. I know that some of you volunteer at the Care and Share in Souderton, knit baby caps for the hospital, volunteer at the community center, help with pancake breakfasts, or spaghetti suppers, or gather together to pray for peace. I know that I can call on you when there is a need.

When Jesus calls and we answer, we begin a journey that twists and turns along the way. Sometimes the path may change. Sometimes it will be rougher than we think we can bear. And sometimes we will fall off the path, just like the disciples did. But that is all part of the transformation; that is how we learn to become fishers of people. When others see that we are not perfect, and our lives are not perfect, but that we are honestly grateful to be

loved and forgiven, they will be curious about that. When they see that we are compelled to pick ourselves up off the ground, dust ourselves off, and keep on walking, and that somehow there is still joy in the midst of hard things, they will want to know, who is this Jesus that we are so intent on following? When they learn that we are not just following a good man with a good message, but that we love Jesus and that love is deep in our hearts and souls, and makes us want to change ourselves and the world, they might just think it's worth following. The time is now. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the gospel. Become fishers of people.