

“The Way of Love”

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The Third Sunday After Epiphany**

Mark 1:14-20

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Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; I Corinthians 7:29-31

Abraham Heschel was a 20th century rabbi who blessed the followers of God with his teachings and his stories. Born in 1907, he escaped Poland to England in 1939 just ahead of the kilns of the death camps. He then made his way to America where he continued lecturing and writing. Heschel had deeply honest about the world as he understood it and balanced his deep spirituality with a God-felt concern for the world. It was Heschel who observed, “There are no proofs of the existence of the God of Abraham. There are only witnesses.”¹

The call of Jesus by the lake and the call of God to those of us who has called ourselves Christians down through the centuries have been to be his witnesses. But in order to do that we must be carried along by God’s love. However, even in our best moments, we love with hesitation and more often than not place qualifications and limitations on God’s love.

Tell me, what does it mean that Jesus could love such an unlovable group of people as we read in the gospels and yet these same people are persons we shame and reject and withhold God’s love? The world is filled with them: Winos and tax collectors and poor folks ... shysters and street kids and overly pious folks ... people with complicated issues of all kinds, “God’s little broken people,” we might call them.

Jesus challenged our limited definitions of love by offering himself as friend and companion to persons most of us would have trouble accepting. And it’s to this world he called us to “follow” in order that we might fish for men and women knowing we are called by God to do so. The command to love is what “fishing for people” is all about, isn’t it?

We say with our lips that love has no limits and cite Jesus as the example for that kind of care, but in our most honest moments, we recognize our hearts are empty of love and often full of hate and prejudice. Nevertheless, the Jesus we worship compels us to love the unlovable. We’re to love the crazies. We’re to love the despised and the destitute. We’re to be God’s fishermen and whatever comes up from the dark waters of life God intends us to show God’s love as if God loved them through us.

In our reading from Mark’s gospel, Jesus called his first disciples. The Greek word used here expresses union, likeness, and a way. In the Greek it’s a call. It’s an invitation to a feast of the divine invitation to embrace salvation of God. It’s not an invitation to believe certain doctrinal statements as though we were engaging in a divine contract of inwardly held beliefs. Neither is it a political platform for social change. It’s not an invitation to quietly held spiritual belief – it’s a real change in how we live and love. It’s a word used here to claim they literally

¹ Abraham Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder, a Spiritual Anthology*, edited by Samuel H. Dresner, New York: Crossroads, 1983, 77

put down their nets and accepted his invitation and “they followed him.” But it’s not just limited in that literalistic meaning because also implied is a metaphorical meaning that suggests a way of discipleship that permeated the whole of life. This notion of following Christ is implied therefore, both in the literal sense and in the metaphorical sense; so no matter how you read it, they followed Jesus explicitly with their whole being.

“Follow me and I will make you fish for people” he told them. Jesus called followers who were willing to go out into the world to announce the kind of good news that would set people free from their twisted and broken selves. To all those people who had lost their way and ruined their lives, Jesus wanted a band of women and men who believed enough in the love of Christ, they would be willing to love even the unlovable.

Fine and good ... but Susan Johnson cautions us, “We cannot be fishers of men and women if in our hearts we are haters of them.”² Our declarations of Christ’s love are just words blowing in the wind if they are not carried along on the actions of Christ-like loving-kindness. The transformation must begin within before we can ever take God’s love. We must be changed; we must act and believe as though the transformation was real before we can take God’s love out to the world.

Jimmy and Janet Dorrell, two friends of ours from days at Baylor, left their ministry position at an affluent Houston suburb where they had a creative and cutting-edge ministry with upper-middle-class kids. But they surprised everyone who knew them, their family, and friends by quitting with no announcement of where they would go next. But they did have a plan. With Seth, their one-year old son in tow and Janet three months pregnant with their second child, they sold their house and used the equity from the proceeds to finance a 3-month tour around the world on a quest in the hopes they would discover a deeper sense of calling from God.

First, they stopped off in L’Abri Switzerland, to visit with Francis Schaeffer who was writing and challenging the secular thinking of the time. They stayed there for over a month to learn from him and from his communal way of life. Janet remained in L’Abri while Jimmy traveled on to Calcutta. Jimmy wanted to see firsthand some of the world’s worst poverty and they felt it was too risky for Janet, Seth and their unborn child to go with him so they stayed behind. There, Jimmy met Mother Teresa and saw with his own eyes what following Christ could mean through the ministry she created there through the Sisters of Charity.

Janet and Seth joined him in South Korea where they met Pastor Cho, the pastor of the world’s largest Christian church – a church that has over a million members. The church had flourished and grown that large because they were implementing a cell church strategy whereby Christians would meet together in small cell groups, usually in a home for Bible study, worship and prayer. It was an amazing, life-changing trip that shattered their sheltered experiences of middle-class America.

Tell me, after all that, after all those amazing trips and after seeing first-hand what God was doing in the world, where does one go next to follow their own calling? After all the searching for God’s will, it seems God does God’s best work in diminutive terms because big

² Susan Johnson, “Love’s Double Victory,” *Christian Century*, January 15, 1997, 47

dreams are conceived in quiet thoughts, small conversations, prayers in the closet & faith the size of a mustard seed. Such small beginnings, but what power they unleash!

After a time of prayer and discerning, they moved back to Waco, where they began their journey of life together. With the remaining leftovers from the sale of their Houston home, they bought a century-old two-story house on one of the most crime-riddled streets in Waco for a mere \$13,000. The house they bought was right across the street from the neighborhood bar and every night, they could hear “the night sounds” of poverty and despair piercing the night in the form of screams and gunshots and near-mayhem.

With big dreams and a calling from God, several young couples that were looking for a similar adventure joined them. Those young couples rolled up their sleeves and created ministries designed to meet the needs of the community. Jimmy paid to have a concrete slab poured in the backyard where the neighbor kids could come to play basketball. Janet helped by forming sewing and cooking classes for the women. They invited Baylor students to leave the affluence of the “false-world of the Baylor campus” to help them form a Teen Club and an afterschool Kids Club.

The Dorrells lived in the upstairs of their rambling house while turning the first floor into a neighborhood beehive of Christian love and concern. In short, they created a community where love and affirmation was lifted up and shared. They shared the cup of Christ’s love with those around them and demonstrated to all that Christ is real and that God loves them all without reservation and without judgment. For three decades now, this couple that heard the calling of Christ “to follow me” and travelled around the world has literally transformed the community.

The bar across the street? Now it’s a church. House by house, the neighborhood was slowly being reclaimed. Chaos was becoming orderly and good. Crime was still present, but it didn’t prevail and neighbors felt safer knowing they weren’t alone. Mission Waco, the name given to their conglomerate of ministries has slowly bought up the block around them. They forged a partnership with Habitat for Humanity in buying vacant lots and building decent homes for those who would never have a chance at home ownership. New entrepreneurial businesses have been created that supply jobs for those who need work. Education programs help the poor learn to read so they can make a decent living.

But that’s not all because they’ve gone so far as to create a church for the homeless. This is not a church led by middle-class do-gooders as a ministry to the poor. Instead the Church Under the Bridge, as it’s called, is led by those who are themselves homeless. They have their own deacons, called and ordained because they’ve given themselves a chance at transformation by God. These are the derelicts of society that we suburbanites would rather not touch or share our fine houses of worship. Homeless men and women serve as small group leaders for Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous and Bible studies for new Christians.

Some day when you’re traveling down I-35 and you hit Waco on a Sunday morning like I did a few years ago ... pull off and join Church Under the Bridge for worship. You’ll likely join a congregation made up of several hundred homeless persons gathered under the bridge for worship. Imagine if you can ... street people with their shopping carts filled with the junk they

call their possessions, pushers and pimps, alcoholics and drug addicted men and women who have fallen through the cracks of society where their lives are shortened and ruined. Several whom I met when I was with our youth group a few years before were still there and greeted me freely. Janet plays lead guitar for the band that's atop a flatbed trailer. When I waved to her, she waved back sweetly during the service and Jimmy gave me the kind of bear hug that is given to all who show up because with Jimmy there are no strangers. Maybe that's the key ... the ability to love as Jesus loved is to see people as persons who Jesus would welcome and embrace as if they were long-lost friends.

Can't you see it? College students singing with toothless winos "How Great Thou Art" to a rocking rhythm or taking Toby Keith's song, "I Love This Bar," reworked to sing, "I Love This Church." Homeless women and men and poverty-stricken children that live in cars are there along with middleclass Christian college students are there seeking redemption. Everyone's dealing with their long-held prejudices and labels and they're swaying in solidarity together to the music as God's gathered children. Jimmy and Janet have learned we cannot be fishers of men and women if we are haters of them. But once the labels are stripped away, what we discover are real people, God's children one and all are there, waiting to be loved.

Walter Brueggemann once prayed this line that sums up what God wants out of us in life: "You (O God) call us beyond ourselves; you send us beyond our imagination; you empower us beyond our capacity, and we become your agents in the world, day-by-day doing justice and mercy and compassion." Amen.