

“How He Did It”

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 23, 2011.

Belleville, the Conference of the Crossings Community.

Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.

INI

Way to go, NRSV. You turned Promise into law!

Jesus emphatically did **not** say he would make **them** do something. He said **he** would do something.

When you use the verb “make” in a construction that has the form “make + person + action,” as in “make you fish,” it has the meaning of *forcing* someone to do something.

But Jesus did not mean he would *force* them to fish for people. His emphasis here was on the great work he *himself* was about to do. He would turn those fish-fishers into *halieis* (fishers) *anthropon* (of people). Just as he had turned water into wine. Just as his father had made people from clay. Jesus would be the agent in the transforming of these peasants into apostles.

Simon and Andrew were *halieis*, fishers. But they were fishers of fish. They were hard workers. Jesus promised that *he . . . would make them . . .* into fishers of people!

So, does the rest of Matthew bear this out? *Did* he make them into people-catchers?

The promise stands here at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Where is the fulfillment? Where but in Matthew 28:19, where he deputizes Simon and Andrew and company.

*Therefore! . . . Go **make disciples of all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, etc., etc.*

There they stood: fishers of people. Ready to go.

In chapter 28 he says “Go.” In chapter 4 he had said “Come.” Actually, “*deute opiso mou.*” And every word is important.

I think “*deute*” in this context is like “Come on!” or “Let’s go.” Fred Danker’s *Concise Lexicon* (available from Amazon for \$43.47 plus shipping), tells us there is an implication of peremptoriness, immediacy. In other words, Jesus is not asking whether they would like to give some thought to possibly being his followers. He’s telling them: “Move it!”

The Duna language of Lake Kopyago in Papua New Guinea has a dandy word for this: “*Ngoae!*” It sounds kind of like the grunt of effort you make when you rise from the ground to begin a long walk. We’d all be sitting around, some having a smoke and some sharpening their axes on a stone from the creek. One person would say “*Ngoae!*” and we’d all get up and go. “*Deute*” means something like that, best I can tell.

And “*opiso mou,*” that’s the same thing Jesus said to Simon when he tried to block the road to crucifixion. “Get behind me, Satan!” is how we remember it—but what he said was “*opiso mou.*” “Behind me.” Not only physically, but also vocationally. We’re not voting on this.

For the sake of symmetry, may I give you another Duna word? “*Ma!*” “Go!”

The trip from chapter 4 to chapter 28 is the process by which they got from “*Ngoae*” to “*Ma!*”

From candidacy to commencement.

From “Come, get behind me” to “Get going; I’m right behind you.”

Jesus said, “Come on, let’s go, follow me, and I will turn you into fishers of people.” Three years later, after all that had taken place in between, Jesus gave “people-fishers” their charge: “Get to work! Throw out your nets! Don’t worry, I’ll be with you. At last you are what I promised to make you!”

Everything between, let us regard as meat on this sandwich. The question is: If between chapter 4 and 28 Jesus turned Simon and Andrew and others into “people-catchers,” just how did he do it? What made it happen?

Did he do it by setting out the requirements and a timetable, and asking them to work on it? Did he sit them down and teach them how to obey the law, how to teach it to others? Did he train them? Was a good education about the law what they needed to become people-catchers?

Certainly, Jesus saw wrongdoing and spoke out against it. Like, didn’t he tell them not to call their brothers mean names? (Simon! Andrew! Are you listening to me??) Could they take that rule and work out a better way of relating, like, according to a “golden rule”? And, when they had gotten really, really good at it themselves, then maybe they would qualify to teach others, or perhaps to sit in judgment on others?

[Level one, for you Crossings people. Elementary legalism. First Aid.]

Or was the problem more complicated? Was it when Jesus delved into people’s hearts and exposed their weak faith and false love that Simon and Andrew took notes? Did they learn from Jesus how to spot a hypocrite? How to be sincere? When he said they should love the Lord their God with all their heart and soul and mind, and all their might, did they ask him for examples of best practices, so they could work on it?

[Level two. Advanced legalism. Second aid.]

Or was the problem still deeper? Oh, yes. More fundamental.

Matthew tells us John the Baptist said people were “living in darkness,” quoting Isaiah 9. “Living in the shadow of death.” But read the bit that comes just before that, in which he *defines* the darkness before dispelling it.

When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter—should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the Torah and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

Not to fear and love and trust in God, is to live without light. To be blind. Not to call upon God in your distress, when you are hungry—is to be without light and life.

Jesus would fix that in Jerusalem, where he would *become* the distressed and hungry One. And when they went to kill him, he was going to . . . *not save himself*. He was going to *let God deliver him*. And . . . God would! [Level 3. Gospelism. Third Aid.]

When his followers saw that, when they got that, which still took time, it didn’t happen overnight, the light went on and the life came back into them, and then they were ready to go. To bring the *world* into a kingdom where people in their distress know they can call upon their God, and he will deliver, because

they are his people, and he loves them. That was why Jesus wanted people-catchers in the first place. Not to bring people into line, but to bring people into life.

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When Simon and Andrew matriculated by the lakeside, they had no idea how low Jesus would take them in order to make them *halieis anthropon*. When they did get an inkling, they tried to divert Jesus onto another path. They did not want Jesus to go to Jerusalem. He would surely get killed there, and they might too, and they didn't sign up for that. They would rather fish for fish, if it came to that. When Jesus wanted to go even to Bethany near Jerusalem, Thomas said, and not with enthusiasm, "Let us also go, so we can die with him."

I wish there were time to examine each pericope in Matthew, and explain how it fits into this curriculum. Trust me, there is almost *no* sign, before chapter 28, that those disciples were ready for commissioning. Apart from their sticking with him. And they even blew that, at the end.

True, he did send them on internship in chapter 10. His strict instructions are recorded, but apparently their report cards were unremarkable. In chapter 16, Peter's "confession of faith" is followed immediately by his little rebellion. By chapter 26 Jesus bleakly tells them they will all fall away.

So why, days later, could Jesus go ahead with commencement exercises?

Because of what *he* had done. He had given them himself. His body. His blood. First, at a table in the upper room. Then, on a cross outside the city. He gave them everything he had left, although they were not worthy of it. Then he called them together and sent them out people-catchers.

Their apostleship, like that of the apostle Paul, had everything to do with God's grace. Grace and apostleship. "Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be." Faithfulness shown to the faithless, mercy to the unmerciful, God . . . to the godless, who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. *Ngoae*.

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Mission . . . is not . . . duty, an ob-ligation tied on our backs by a Lord who wants to squeeze blood from turnips. It says here not "duty" but "*deute*," as in "*ngoae*," "come on, let's go." "*Deute*" calls us and then sends us, the way Jesus sent the Gadarene demoniac, to "go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you."

Amen.