

Sunday, January 22
3rd Sunday of Epiphany

Follow me, and I will make you fish for people:
Jesus, calling his disciples on the shore of the sea of Galilee,
fishing for the, the fishermen,
inviting them
to become, at their turn, fishers for people.
That's probably a very well-known passage for most of us.

Isaiah 9:1-4
Psalm 27:1,5-13
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23

The Rev Fanny Belanger

Yet, sometimes the things we know the best
are also the ones we genuinely understand the least.
We don't understand them truly because they seem so obvious, we let them
sit in the back of our minds,
unquestioned and unchallenged. We know what it's all about.

As for me, I had always assumed I knew exactly what
fishing for people was all about.
It has always meant, in a way or another, *catching people*.
Catching ordinary people and turning them into disciples
turning them into Christians.
Telling people about faith and bringing them to church.

Well, a few weeks ago I have been quite challenged in this belief.
I was reading an article,
an article not written by a scholar, a priest or a theologian,
an article in a women's magazine
that just turned my understanding of this text upside down.

The article was about the story of Captain Klaus Vogel,
a man who worked in merchant marine.
One day, they found on his ship a clandestine, a Senegalese man,
trying to flee his country.
As Vogel was the only person on board speaking French,
he could talk with the man who told him about his life, and the reasons why he was trying to escape.
Vogel could not do much to help the man,
but his story stuck with him.
And as Vogel went on sailing, he learned more and more
about refugees,
and mainly about refugees
sinking into the sea because they embark on all they can afford with their last savings
- unsafe cheap boats.
And they usually drown because other ships would not stop to rescue them.
Ships would not stop to rescue them

– *Who cares? They are just refugees.*

But Vogel started caring. Because of the clandestine, he started caring a lot.
Long story short, he decided to create an association,
with a team cruising the Mediterranean sea to rescue the shipwrecked.

And so this is what happened:

Captain Vogel literally became a fisher for men.

You see, there is a big difference between fishing for fish
and fishing people.

When you fish a fish, you lure it,
you trap it,
and then when you take it out of the sea you kill it,
because you want to eat it, or to sell it and make a profit out of it.
It's generally not immoral (although there are many very destructive ways of fishing today)
but it's certainly not something you do for the good of the fish,
right?

Well, when you fish for people, that's exactly the other way around.
When you fish for people, you literally save their lives.
When you take them out of the sea
you save them from drowning,
you enable them to breathe.
You bring them back to life.

So when Jesus asks us to become fishers for people,
Jesus sends us not to catch people to trap them into religion.
Jesus sends us to be with him and save people's lives.

Sometimes saving their lives literally – their physical lives, as does Klaus Vogel -
but Jesus also sends us to be with those who are drowning
in their fear, loneliness, anguish.
(You certainly know that the sea was considered in Jesus's time as a symbol of death and evil)

Jesus comes as a light in the darkness.
To break the yoke of our burden, the bar across our shoulders, the rod of our oppressor.
And so this is the program: To proclaim the good news of the kingdom,
and as he does so, Jesus cures sickness and disease among the people.

This is who Jesus is, and this is what following Jesus means:
It is about caring for people.
Not only our people, but all the people
especially those who are threatened, and those who have nobody who cares about them.

But let's be mindful of this because in mirror, this is also what it means:
If we don't care for people,
maybe we are Christians
maybe we are believers
maybe we go to church, maybe we quote the Bible, maybe we pray on our knees,
but if we don't care for people as Jesus cared for people,
we are not following Jesus.
As the ships on the Mediterranean sea that just pass by the people who are drowning,
if we remain still or silent in face of injustices
we still may be nice people and good citizens
but we won't be following Jesus.

Because when you're following Jesus, you save lives with him.

We have to be careful of course, of pretending to be saviors for people,
when ourselves are first in need of salvation

- Jesus is the only savior after all.

But I think what we want to do as fishers for people is to
work to make space on the boat for everybody,
we try to take a little less room for ourselves,
we work
so everyone can breathe, and be safe and be able, instead of drowning, to
go back to the life they were created to live, stand on firm ground and participate in our communities.

As we hold today our annual meeting,
it's a good time to remember what it means to be a church.
For so many people today outside the church, we're just a place of worship, a place where we speak
about Jesus

a place to get married,
a place to be buried

How could our churches, and this church, be places where lives are transformed and saved?

We may think the disciples could do all these things, cure and heal, because they were saints –
well, no they weren't!

Jesus turned them into saints.

But they were ordinary people.
They were ordinary people just like you and me.
They had a job, a family to feed, they probably rather avoiding trouble
and we know they weren't the braver among the braves.

And yet, they followed Jesus.

So how do we do that?

Well, the more I think about it, the more I enjoy this metaphor Jesus uses
Fishing for people

Because once again, Jesus speaks to us exactly the language we can understand.

To fishers of fish Jesus only asks one thing
(He does not ask them to become scholars or theologians)
he asks them to become fishers for people.

That also means:

You don't have to become somebody else to become a saint.

You don't have to acquire new gifts.

You just have to be exactly who you truly are, you just have to be doing what you have always loved
doing. You just need to let God

transcends your gifts.

Instead of using our gifts for ourselves, we use our gifts
to bring life and to care.

And so what Jesus says is: *If you are a fisher, fish for people,*
If you are a cook, feed the hungry,
If you are a writer or a singer, be the voice of those who have no voice,
If you are a lawyer or a politician, fight for justice and equity.

What you do well, do it for people.

From the place where we stand, Jesus calls us to

love. This is this love that struck the disciples,
in the blinking of an eye, immediately.
They could leave everything behind,
not because they were heroes, but because they fell in love and this love could transcend
their fear
and they took the risk to follow Jesus.

Fishing for people is a dangerous job.
When you plunge head first to rescue somebody from drowning
you may risk your life, too.
You cannot save a shipwrecked by sitting around in your living-room.
And so, what we find out when we really care for people's lives
is that we cannot always do it

from a place of safety.

It's great, it's really great but it's not enough to give away our extra food and clothing,
to smile to people on the street
it's not enough to be pleasant and well-meaning to everybody,
when we are not ready to risk our own lives, if needed.

It does not always mean we risk to lose our life literally.
But sometimes we may risk
our position, our privileges, our relations,
or even just our desire to cruise life safely and peacefully
think our thoughts, pray our prayers and hope for the best.

But we cannot follow Christ and somebody else as Paul reminds us.
We cannot be divided.

We can't belong to Apollos, we can't belong to Cephas, we can't even belong to Paul
if we want to belong to Christ only.

Fishing for people can be self-sacrificing – we cannot always afford to be lukewarm or passive.
We cannot always pretend to be just people of good will.
We cannot follow two directions in the same time, be accommodating,
sometimes the context is such that we have to make
decisions.

Our decisions should not be based on complicated arguments, trying to justify ourselves.
Our decisions should be based on what in us speaks
love and compassion
and feels right deep down.

Compassion that in Greek means literally: A guts feeling.

I think it's great to remember that when we're lost and confused, when we're challenged in what we
have always taken for granted, when we don't know who to listen to, how to respond to a situation,
we can always remember that
to follow Jesus we'll just have to trust our compassion, our guts feeling.
Like did the disciples, like did Klaus Vogel.

Take the decision to be an active presence of love in a world full of anguish and
confusion
Because if God is living inside of us, calling us from this deeper place by stirring up in us this
compassion
then whom shall we fear?