

Going Fishing

by Maureen Smith

Text: Matthew 4:12-23

In 1965, a missionary arrived in the United States. Usually America has been the sender of missionaries, but this man believed strongly that America needed a spiritual awakening.

He was 70 years old. The trip by freighter was almost too much for him, and he had two heart attacks along the way. He arrived penniless, with only the clothes on his back, a typewriter, and some books. Before he had been here long, the typewriter was stolen.

But after a year of struggle he got himself set up in a little storefront office in a run-down neighborhood in New York City, and he went out into the parks and started talking and handing out books. He was a charismatic person, and many young people were drawn to him and went out themselves to spread the word.

His name was Swami Prabhupada, and he was the founder of the Hare Krishna movement. People like me who are old enough to remember the 1960s will remember the Hare Krishnas, who were often seen in airports and other public places, wearing saffron robes, chanting and dancing. The name they were chanting was Krishna, one of the most popular names for God in Hinduism. One of the Beatles, George Harrison, became something of a Hare Krishna.

Since the death of the founder in 1977, the Hare Krishna movement hasn't been as strong, but there are still Hare Krishnas in the Twin Cities.

So why am I talking about the founder of the Hare Krishnas? I heard the story in a great class I took last semester at Hamline on the Religions of South Asia, and I thought about it when I looked at our text from Matthew. It's a 20th century example of the power one person can have, and then a few people, in spreading a message.

We could maybe even learn something from the Hare Krishnas, some things to do and some things not to do. I'm not recommending that any of you put on unusual clothes and go to the airport handing out tracts. I'm not even sure that would be allowed at the airport in 2008, and I just can't see anyone here doing it.

Our Christian faith, of course, began with one person—Jesus—and then a few of his followers in the first century, and it spread in amazing ways to become the largest world religion. Our text in the 4th chapter of Matthew is a story of beginnings. All we have before this passage are the birth narrative, the baptism of Jesus, and the temptation in the wilderness. In chapter 4, Jesus begins his ministry.

After Jesus hears that John the Baptist had been arrested, he withdraws into Galilee to prepare himself for ministry. John was the forerunner to Jesus, preparing the way. Maybe in his arrest Jesus also saw danger to himself—because Jesus was surrounded with threats from beginning to end—or maybe Matthew wanted to make it clear that Jesus never preached in competition with John.

John is out of the picture, and it is time for Jesus to begin his ministry. For this, he moves to Capernaum, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. Matthew, as he does so often, quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures—here, from the prophet Isaiah—to show that every move Jesus made was in line with prophecy. And then, in these few verses, we learn a lot about Jesus' ministry.

He preaches, calling people to repentance. Unlike John, he isn't talking so much about sin and remorse but about a change of direction, taking on a new set of values. Verse 23 sums it up: Jesus teaches in the synagogues, he preaches the gospel—the good news—of God's reign, and he heals every sickness among the people. From the start, he is a preacher, a teacher, and a healer.

An important part of the passage is the calling of the first four disciples, two pairs of brothers, Peter and Andrew, and James and John. All four are fishers.

So much is packed into a few verses, and we'd like to know more. Did Jesus choose these four men as his disciples because he knew them, and did they put down their nets right away to follow him because they knew who he was? Or was this their first encounter, and did they follow him simply because of the authority with which he spoke? We can speculate, but we don't know. We are told what is important: that they follow him instantly, without hesitation. Jesus says "Follow me," and they follow.

What jumped out for me in this passage was the mission Jesus gave to these new disciples—to fish for people. Is this also what we are called to do as disciples in the 21st century?

We don't want to do it, most of us, do we? Evangelism is an uncomfortable idea, uncomfortable for the people who engage in it, and uncomfortable for the people who are targeted. It's even a scary thing for me to talk about. If I tell you we're supposed to be evangelists, some of you will think I'm pushing you to do something you don't want to do and might even think is a wrong thing to do. If I tell you I don't think we are necessarily called to be evangelists in all the traditional ways, some of you may think I am being untrue to our biblical faith.

Maybe the first thing to think about is why it's so uncomfortable. Most of us are quite happy to be evangelistic about other things. "I saw the greatest movie last night. I read the best book. I discovered a fabulous new restaurant. You'd love it. You have to see it, read it, check it out."

Can you even imagine speaking in the same tone of voice about your church? "I'm going to the greatest church. David Colby preaches fabulous sermons, the music is glorious, the ministry is making a difference, the people are so friendly and welcoming. You'd love it. You have to go some Sunday."

We might say the first part, and mean it, but not the part about "You'd love it" and "You have to go." And I'm not saying we should. People's choices about faith and church are so personal that we don't want to be pushy, and most people would react negatively if we tried. Even if we decide we want to be fishing for people, we aren't going to drag people in with nets the way Peter and Andrew and James and John did with their fish.

Maybe we can put some bait on our hooks—say the things we love about our church—offer to bring people with us—invite them to an event other than a worship service—I can sometimes invite my own friends on Sundays when I’m preaching—but we don’t want to push. We want it to be an invitation, without any pressure.

If it’s scary to be evangelistic about our church, it’s even scarier to be evangelistic about our faith. And there are good reasons for that, too, because so much of the evangelism people have experienced over the years has turned them off.

I was thinking about the three young Hare Krishna men who came to my class this winter, and how easily they talked about their faith. They knew people might see them as weird, but they talked comfortably about what they believed and how they lived. But then, people were curious about them, and they were invited to class for that very reason.

It’s different with Christianity. People think they know all about it. Maybe they went to church when they were young and they had a bad experience, or maybe church was fine back then but they just think their lives are too busy now to make room for it, or maybe they never went to church but they’ve picked up their ideas about it from the culture. It’s as if they’ve come close enough to Christianity to be inoculated against it. Traditional evangelism, then, won’t work for them.

Notice the people I’m talking about: people of Christian backgrounds who used to go to church and don’t any more, and secular people who don’t have any religious affiliation. If churches like ours could win these people back in significant numbers, or capture the interest of those who never had a church in the first place, as well as church going people who move to downtown St. Paul, our pews would be full, and, more important, we could make a huge difference for good in the world.

There is an ethic among Christian churches that we don’t try to steal people from each other. Now of course we understand that people may have reasons for wanting to change churches—a church that used to be a good fit may not feel right any more, either because the church has changed or the people have changed—and if people want to attend worship at Central, or join our church, we welcome them with open arms. But we would never try to talk anyone into leaving a church.

I would propose the same ethic for people of other religions. I struggled with what to say about this, but then it hit me that I really think the approach should be the same for everyone—whether people are nonbelievers, or Christians who are church shopping, or members of other religions. No matter what group we’re talking about, we shouldn’t be pushing.

I have told you before about my good friends who are Tibetan Buddhists, followers of the Dalai Lama. They are such good people, and their Buddhism is so much at the core of them. If I tried to convert them to Christianity, the only thing that would happen would be that they wouldn’t trust me any more.

It makes me feel good that we’ve had Jewish people, and Hindus, and maybe others, in worship with us at Central, and I hope they have felt welcomed and comfortable and haven’t felt any pressure to convert to Christianity.

People who know me know how important interfaith dialogue has been to me, and you know I don't hold to the idea that everyone who isn't a Christian is headed for hell. That's something else I would suggest about our evangelism—that we talk positively about our own faith or our own church without saying people need to be Christians “or else.” I say drop the “or else.”

This is a theological issue for me, but it's also practical. Trying to scare people into church or into faith doesn't usually work these days. If anything, it drives people away. That was one thing I noticed about the Hare Krishnas: they were joyful, and they didn't say “or else.”

After my own conversion to Christianity I was a member for years of a Presbyterian church that was more on the evangelical side, and people genuinely believed they had to save nonbelievers from hell, but some of them also said we had to tell people they were headed to hell or they would never choose to become Christians.

That always seemed so strange and so wrong to me. These were people who said they had found great joy and deep meaning in their Christian faith. Why wasn't that enough? Why did they think their best selling point was to offer people a ticket out of hell?

I've been using the word conversion, but I think a better word is transformation. And when transformation happens, it is its own best selling point. People may not think they need church—they might not even think they need God—but they do want joy, they want meaning in their lives, they want love. And they want chances to work together with others to make a difference in the world.

If they can see this happening in us, and in our church, they just might want some of what we have. Ideally we might not even be thinking along those lines when they see it in us or in our church, but that could be the best fishing hook we could ever find. Martha's Closet, and FIRE, and Project Home are wonderful ministries—offering real help to people who need it—and they may also be some of the best evangelism we do, both for the people who are helped and for others who see it happening.

I have to end with a quote from St. Francis, even though I've used it before. “Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.”