

Psalm 27:10-49
Matthew 4:12-23

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

In the early 1980's the courts deemed that American Telephone and Telegraph (otherwise known as AT&T) was a monopoly, and thus, AT&T was divested of all its subsidiary companies. Soon afterwards, rival long-distance phone companies – like MCI and Sprint – came into being. These rival companies began calling people and enticing them to switch from AT&T to their company.

On a number of occasions, one or more of these new companies would call our house and invite us to make the switch. I explained to the telephone marketer that my family was from St. Louis, MO, which was the headquarters for Southwestern Bell Telephone Company – one of the subsidiary companies under AT&T. My grandfather, dad and mom, brother, and sister-in-law had all worked for Southwestern Bell, and their collective work history spanned over 125 years of employment. There was no way I could betray the family and switch from Bell Tel. (and its allegiance to AT&T) and join with another long-distance carrier. Usually, the telephone marketer agreed and politely hung up. I use to joke with my family that I was “the black sheep of the family” for going into the ministry instead of the telephone company, although I guess I was still in the “communications” line of work. Nevertheless, the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, which had been tied to AT&T, was the family business. Ma Bell put a lot of food on our table as it did many other tables throughout the St. Louis area.

Now then, here's where we make the transition from the opening story to the gospel narrative. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus had just returned from the wilderness where the devil had tempted him three times, but Jesus had steadfastly refused to yield to the devil's demands and switch allegiance from obeying the Lord God. Soon after, Jesus learned that King Herod had arrested his cousin, John the Baptist, and this provided the trigger that initiated Jesus' public ministry. Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Shortly thereafter, Jesus began to call the disciples to follow him for they were part of the family of God. Jesus summoned Simon Peter and his brother, Andrew, along with the sons of Zebedee (James and his brother, John). And, because they were indeed members of God's family, Jesus told these former fishermen they would learn a new occupation; they would learn the family business, which was to “fish for people,” and, with God's help, bring others into God's family, the Church.

Here recently, we remembered Jesus' baptism, and in doing so, we also remembered and celebrated our own baptism into the family of God. As part of the holy family, we are called to take up the family business, which is to tell others the Good News of Jesus Christ. This task is so vitally important that Matthew began his gospel with Jesus telling the two pairs of brothers that they would now be fishing for people; and Matthew ended his gospel with Jesus proclaiming: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Given the fact that the family business is to proclaim good news about Jesus Christ, how do we fulfill our calling and live out our mission? I think we begin with taking Jesus' promise very seriously that he truly is “with us always.” We are not alone; we are not left to our own devices.

We go forth with the indwelling Spirit of God to guide us and use us to live our faith so as to reflect the One, who is the light of the world. God will present us with opportunities to share our faith, and God will give us the ideas, the words, and the encouragement when the time is right.

Here's another thing: I use to think that Jesus came up to Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John, "sight unseen" and, with his magnetic personality, said, "Follow me," and they dropped their nets and followed him. I no longer think that was the case. Since the gospel writers only gave us the pertinent details of what we need to know about Jesus, so that we will embrace him as Lord and Savior, I now think that, prior to this narrative, Jesus had spent time with these four fishermen. He really got to know them and share with them his vision of the kingdom of God. They liked what they heard, so, when Jesus invited them to follow him as their Master, they didn't hesitate.

Likewise, I think the family business of good news bearing is done best in relationship with others. God may call others to do so, but we aren't necessarily called to be an evangelist preaching to thousands or a witness who goes up to a complete stranger and ask them if they've found Jesus. For one, we don't find Jesus at all. Instead, God searches for and finds us. God takes the initiative and comes looking for us, and, by grace, invites us to join the family, and then sends us out to invite others to do the same. The invitation is best offered when we know the persons, have spent time with them, and can be ourselves with them. As we engage in personal relationships and conversations with others, we can express our faith either through words or deeds. We just need to be ourselves and reflect the light of Christ along the way.

After all, the text gives us a clue as to why we are called to bear good news to others—besides the fact that Jesus commanded us to do so. What was true in the time of Jesus (and before) is still true today, namely: "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:1-2). Then and now, people live in darkness. There is a great need for light to enter their lives and push back the darkness or to give hope in the midst of death. The Church, the family of God, has testified for two thousand years that Jesus is the Light of the World. In him alone, we find strength when we are weak, courage when we are anxious and fearful, and hope in the midst of despair. How often have we said that the death of a loved one would be so much harder to deal with were it not for our faith in the risen Christ and the eternal light and life he offers us on both sides of the grave? We live, and move, and have our being in a world filled with bad news, horrible atrocities, and much suffering. There is always a need for good news to be shared.

And, that's where we enter into the picture. As we see in the passage for today, the Lord uses ordinary people, doing ordinary tasks (like fishing), in order to accomplish his mission of telling others the Good News so that they can hear and respond. Do you know that when people are asked why they don't go to church, this is the primary reason – no one ever asked me. God is asking us to invite people into God's family, but, in doing so, God doesn't make us change or be someone we are not. Instead, Jesus calls people in terms they can understand and by doing what they do best.

Thus, Peter, Andrew, James, and John, who were all fishermen, were invited to go fishing for people. God reassures us that we can testify on God's behalf, because it's not so different from what we have already done. We already have several of the job skills involved; we just have to adapt what we know.

Here are some other calls Jesus might have extended to would-be disciples. Follow me, you teachers, and I will help you instruct others about the faith. Follow me, you musicians, and I will help you instill music in the hearts of others. Follow me, you businessmen and women, and

I will help you to help others to be about the Father's business. Follow me, you architects and construction workers and I will help you help others build a life that is meaningful. Follow me, you cooks and chefs, and I will make you season and leaven and serve and preserve more than just food! Follow me, you friends, you parents, you children, you siblings, you neighbors, and I will make you all these things – to every other human being. Christ Jesus always starts where we already are, and then he goes with us to proclaim the Good News to others (With thanks to Anna Carter Florence for the idea found in *Lectionary Homiletics*, January 2008, p. 74)

I said earlier, "We can express our faith through words or deeds." Evangelism, or bearing the good news of Christ, is not an either/or but a both/and. We proclaim God's goodness both in terms of what we say and in what we do for the sake of others. The four fishermen learned that fishing for people involved both the words of their mouths, and the work of their hands. So, if you are uncomfortable with witnessing to Christ in conversation with another, then bear the good news through what you do, by the way you live and give of yourself to others.

I read recently about a thirteen-year-old boy, Robert Hill, who many years ago heard of the medical missionary work of Dr. Albert Schweitzer and decided to help by sending a bottle of aspirin to Schweitzer's hospital in Africa. Since Robert's father was in the Army, stationed in Italy, he asked the commander of the Air Force to deliver the bottle of aspirin in one of his planes. A radio commentator reported the incident on his program with the result that Robert Hill flew into Africa with four tons of medical supplies, on planes provided by the Italian and French governments. When Dr. Schweitzer saw the boy, he said, "I never knew a little child could do so much for my hospital." Some would say this was a matter of charity or compassion; but, at a deeper level, it was evangelism, bearing the Good News – not in words, but in deeds. Here was a boy, very much like that boy in scriptures who offered Jesus a few fish and loaves, who gave what he could in service to others.

The power of God's love, working through ordinary people, can accomplish extraordinary things for the kingdom of God. All we have to do is be faithful with what God has given us and then go and live out the Good news for the sake of others.

I guess one of the reasons I am so intent on carrying out Jesus' command to go and make disciples and partake in the family business – besides the fact that it is scriptural – is because of Blanche. I don't know Blanche. I've never had the pleasure of meeting her, and I probably won't in this life as I suspect that she died a number of years ago. But I will always be profoundly grateful for Blanche. You see, she took seriously the family business of being a disciple and going and making more disciples for Christ. Over forty-five years ago, Blanche asked her neighbors across the street if she could take their three children – their daughter and two sons – to church with her. The children's parents, who were unable to go to church due to differing reasons, gave their consent and, soon after, Blanche took the three children to Sunday School and church with her and then brought them back home. She got the children started and, in time, one by one, each of those children made their profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and became very active in the life of the church. A few years later, when the mother died and then the father, the church was there for those three young people; and, the youth's faith in Christ, the light of the world helped them to hold steady in the midst of the darkness of loss and the shadow of death. Fast forward a few more years, and the oldest of the three asked a young man out on a date, and he had the good sense to accept. Because of Blanche's faithful witness to Jesus Christ, she was used by God to bring three children into God's family, and eventually she made it possible for me to meet my wife-to-be Monica. Thank you, Blanche!

We are members of God's family, and we are called to take up the family business and tell others – through our actions and our words – that there is good news to be found in Jesus Christ. May we be more intentional about inviting someone to church, to God's house, so that a great light may shine upon him or her and dispel the darkness. And, who knows, there may even be an unexpected joy for us in turn. The King and the kingdom of heaven have come near. Now then, what in the world are we going to do about that Good News? Amen.

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January 23, 2011