**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC         2/1/15/**

 ***They Followed Him***

 **A Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Mark 1:14-20

This is the story of Jesus calling the first four of his disciples, two pairs of brothers, according to the Gospel of Mark.

**SERMON**

“Do what you love, and you’ll never work a day in your life,” so the saying goes.

Did the fishermen in the Gospel love fishing?  Maybe they did, and maybe they didn’t, but one thing is certain: when Jesus called, they answered, leaving their nets and boats behind.

The fishermen didn’t say, “Give me a day to think about it,” or “We need to ask the old man.”  The fishermen didn’t say anything.

The Gospel simply states: “Jesus said to Simon and his brother Andrew, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

A little later when Jesus sees two more brothers, James and John, “Immediately Jesus called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.”

Both Jesus and his four new disciples are acting with a sense of urgency. They have something new and important to do.  Jesus has just started teaching, preaching and healing, and he wants and needs some helpers and companions along the way.

The new disciples are eager to put Galilee behind them and follow Jesus. It’s likely that they had heard about Jesus, and they may have even heard Jesus teaching and preaching before he called them.

Fishing in New Testament times was backbreaking work, done at night with little economic reward. But I like to think that their desire to leave fishing and Galilee is less important to these fishermen than their desire to follow this new and charismatic rabbi, whose message is more about God’s love than God’s law, and who is inviting them to catch people rather than fish, and bring their catch into the Kingdom of Heaven, rather than into shore.

The four fishermen felt a connection with Jesus, a bond that was strong enough to lure them away from everyone and everything that was familiar and into the unknown.

How would they eat?  Where would they sleep? How would they travel?  Where would they go?

These questions don’t seem to matter to them.  If they had survived on the sea, they probably assumed they could survive on the land, and Jesus was rumored to have magical powers anyway.  So the two pairs of brothers took a leap of faith and cast their lot, for better or worse, with Jesus.

A number of members and friends of West Center Church also left the familiar behind. A number of members and friends of West Center Church left homes and jobs, family and friends, churches and other communities in Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois and other places, seeking something different, something new in old New York.

Other West Center members and friends have stayed closer to home, geographically anyway, making moves in other ways, such as careers, interests and relationships.

In American culture, at least part of establishing our own identity is leaving home behind, and heading off into the frontier.

John F. Kennedy in his acceptance speech for the nomination as the Democrat’s candidate for the Presidency in 1960 used the words “New Frontier.”  “New Frontier” became descriptive words for both JFK’s campaign and what he would try to accomplish as President.

Quoting from John Kennedy’s nomination acceptance speech of 1960:

*[W]e stand today on the edge of a New Frontier — the frontier of the 1960's, the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, the frontier of unfilled hopes and unfilled threats.* ... *Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus.*

I am sorry to say that the New Frontier that Kennedy spoke of --- a frontier of opportunities and perils, with unsolved problems of peace and war, ignorance and prejudice, poverty and surplus, remains a frontier today.

The problems were not conquered.  The assassinations of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy set us back, as did Vietnam and Watergate. And so the problems of the New Frontier remain, and we need to develop some new approaches if they are to be solved, some fifty-plus years later. And since 9/11, the threat of terrorism has been added to the list.

The frontier is part of the American psyche, as well as the American experience.  And whether we move or stay put, there are always new things that we are called to accomplish.

Notice that I said “there are always new things that we are called to accomplish,” rather saying “there are always new things that we want to accomplish.”

For as members of the Church and followers of Jesus, like the former fishermen, we have a calling, a “divine calling.” We have a divine calling to live according to the two great commandments of Jesus: “first, to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength, and the second, which is like it, to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.”

In the Gospel reading for today, the four fishermen stop what they are doing and follow Jesus immediately, and while that may seem pretty amazing, a number of us do the same thing, don’t we?

When it is time for church on Sunday morning or a church activity on another day of the week, don’t we also stop what it is we are doing, and leave home to follow Jesus?

Whether it is coming early to set up for Coffee Hour or to be a greeter, whether it is staying late to clean up after Coffee Hour or to go to a Board meeting or a Bible Study, whether it is sitting down with the Lunch Bunch on a Thursday or standing in line to buy things for one of our World Service collections, whether it is bringing, selling or buying things at our Holiday Boutique and Spring Tag Sale, whether it is playing the organ, singing in the choir or singing in the pews, we have heard Jesus calling. We have heard Jesus calling and like Simon, Andrew, James and John, we stop our normal activities.

We forego what we might have done or even what we wanted to do, to do something different, something we are called to do, to do some things we might have a hard time explaining why we do them to others or even to ourselves.

And yet even though we are already following Jesus, we might consider following him more urgently and following him a second mile during this new year of 2015.

We might think about Simon and Andrew, James and John, and follow their example.

Maybe we could think more deliberately about what we are doing to follow Jesus. We could think more deliberately about what we are doing to follow Jesus by asking ourselves this question in the morning: “How can I better follow Jesus today?” And we could ask ourselves this question in the evening,: “How did I follow Jesus today?”

 Our personal answers to each of these questions will be quite different, depending on our situations and our special gifts or talents.

One size does not fit all, even in following Jesus. The important think is to be deliberate in our thinking and in our acting as we follow our Lord.

And one more thing, in addition to having a sense of urgency about following Jesus, we also might consider following Jesus farther afield, moving beyond our customary comfort zones, whether our comfort boundaries be geographic or social, economic or political.

In 2015 we might well follow Jesus further, follow Jesus into that New Frontier that really wasn't and isn’t so new after all. We might follow Jesus by considering what we might do as individuals and as the Church about peace and war, ignorance and prejudice, poverty and abundance.

For peace, love and justice are the very things that Jesus teaches and preaches about, the things that are closest to his heart.

And so may peace, love and justice fill our hearts as well, as Jesus calls us to leave our nets and follow him.

Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE**

*Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore*

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