

Over the next four weeks, we are going to talk about what it means to follow Jesus by fishing for people. We are going to think about casting our nets widely and being relentless in our focus on those people who do not yet know the love of God or the power of being a part of a community of believers. So be prepared. We may stretch you to do some things that are uncomfortable. But in my experience, that is what spiritual growth is all about—we can't grow without being stretched into new territory. And God calls each one of us to do whatever it takes to share the good news of Christ's love. It is part of who we are as disciples of Jesus. We are called to be relentlessly focused on those who are outside the walls of the church.

Matthew 4:12-22 Common English Bible (CEB)

Move to Galilee

**12** Now when Jesus heard that John was arrested, he went to Galilee. **13** He left Nazareth and settled in Capernaum, which lies alongside the sea in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. **14** This fulfilled what Isaiah the prophet said:

**15** *Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,  
alongside the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles,  
16 the people who lived in the dark have seen a great light,  
and a light has come upon those who lived in the region and in shadow of death.* [a]

**17** From that time Jesus began to announce, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!”

Calling of the first disciples

**18** As Jesus walked alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. **19** “Come, follow me,” he said, “and I’ll show you how to fish for people.” **20** Right away, they left their nets and followed him. **21** Continuing on, he saw another set of brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with Zebedee their father repairing their nets. Jesus called them and **22** immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

### **Catch: Invitational Evangelism Becoming Relentlessly Outward Focused**

In this week's scripture, we have Matthew's version of Jesus calling four of the disciples, and today I invite you to put yourselves in the place of those four and think about what it means to be disciples and to really follow Jesus. There are two distinct parts of this scripture -- one is Jesus moving to Galilee and the other is Jesus calling the disciples. Both are important to the message today. The first thing I want to share is the significance of Jesus's move to the land of Zebulun and Naphtali because there is some sacred geography at work here.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/markshea/2014/01/land-of-zebulun-land-of-naphtali-galilee-of-the-gentiles.html> I want to share a little of the geography and the history – it will really help you to understand what it is that Matthew is saying in this scripture. It's necessary for us to know

about the Old Testament to understand the geography. You may know about Abraham – the father of our faith, whom God promised his descendants would be numerous and that he would be given the promised land. Abraham’s son was Isaac. And Isaac’s son was Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons which became the twelve tribes of Israel. Each of the 12 tribes received its own territory to live in when the Israelites finally reached the promised land of Canaan when Jacob was their leader. And Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the twelve tribes of Israel and also the name of the territory where they lived. Capernaum was located in Naphtali and Nazareth was located in Zebulun. Today’s scripture says that Jesus left Nazareth, his hometown, and he went to Capernaum, which is where he began his ministry. So Zebulun and Naphtali are the places where Jesus grew up and where he began his ministry as an adult.

Now let me take you back to the history during the time of Isaiah. At that time, about 700 years before Matthew wrote his gospel – around 722 BC, the King of Assyria had conquered and annexed the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali and exiled many of the people. So in other words, the Assyrian King came in with his army and conquered the people by force, killing many people and then forcing others to leave their homeland and go into exile – to live in the enemy’s territory. Those exiled were often the wealthy people or the educated or those with skills that the Assyrians could use. This left the poorest and weakest people to struggle for their survival. Assyria also resettled people of other languages, cultures and religions in Zebulun and Naphtali so that the remnant of those living in Zebulun and Naphtali would be “thoroughly disoriented and demoralized,” so that they would be really unlikely to be able to band together and rise up against the king and his army. And they probably lost a lot of their religious memory and rituals. The number of Israelites practicing their Jewish faith would have been significantly watered down by non-Jewish people – there would have been many gentiles there.

And so, Isaiah describes Zebulun and Naphtali (which were along the Sea of Galilee) as a Galilee of the nations – people of many nations were living all together in one place. Isaiah predicts that Zebulun and Naphtali who were the first to fall to the King of Assyria would be the first to receive the light. Isaiah prophesies, that this is what will happen in the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned. You have made the nation great; you have increased its joy. (Isaiah 9:2)

With the birth of Jesus and his residence in Nazareth and with the beginning of Jesus’s ministry in Capernaum, the prophecy is fulfilled.

Things had not significantly improved for the people of this region, even by the time of Jesus. They walked in darkness, waiting for the great light that Isaiah described. They were waiting for a Messiah who would save the people. Under Roman rule during the days of Jesus, these territories had become places of relative peace – there were no invading kings or the resettlement of people in the land. However, one commentator wrote that the past had left its deep wounds on this land. “The scars were still everywhere and still wreaking damage on the image of these people.” Life there was described as difficult and gloomy and hopeless. And it is exactly this dark place that God chose to send his son to begin his ministry – God sent the light of the world into a place of darkness, into a land full of this mass of humanity – this Galilee of the nations, this Galilee of the Gentiles – this place of darkness.

Jesus came into a land of darkness. Jesus came into a land filled with faithful Jewish people, yes, but he also came into a land filled with people of all nationalities and languages – a

land of Gentiles who weren't believers. It was a land that had lived through centuries of tragedy and difficulty. If we study the life of Jesus, we can see that it is a huge part of the mission of Jesus to invite people who are struggling hard to come and follow him. We know that Jesus invites every person of every nation to come and follow him. We know that Jesus invites his fellow Israelites as well as Gentiles. We know that Jesus invited all of God's people, especially the least and the lost, to come and follow.

And that has not changed. This scripture is deeply relevant in our world today. The world today is sometimes dark, and it is sometimes hopeless. We struggle hard. The world is still a place of many people of differing backgrounds and cultures. And even today, Jesus invites us to come and follow – this invitation is for all of us – for every one of us. Maybe even especially for those of us who feel like our lives bear the scars of life or that we are in a dark place. The invitation still stands to come and follow. Jesus is the light that is the solution to the world's darkness.

Next -- notice that Jesus's first step of his work involves calling these unqualified fishermen to come and follow. He doesn't call the Pharisees – the religious leaders and scholars to follow. He calls people who are available and willing to follow with all that they are. There's a saying that we don't have to be able, we just have to be available to follow Jesus. He calls people who are willing to give up their livelihoods and their families to follow. Jesus calls people to follow with all that they are. It seems illogical and contrary to us to leave everything behind to follow Jesus, but there is something about the presence of Jesus that leads these fishermen to give it all up to follow.

Jesus promises the four fishermen that he will teach them to be fishers of people. He doesn't say, "follow me and I will give you salvation." Or "follow me and you will have everlasting life." Jesus says, "Follow me and I will teach you." Teaching was a very important part of Jesus' work on earth. He taught the disciples how to love God and how to love people so that they could experience salvation and a joyful life on earth. But his **secondary purpose** is our focus today. Jesus's secondary purpose in calling them to follow was so that they could then go out and teach others. Their mission was to tell others about the love of God in Christ Jesus.

If we do come to follow, if we drop our nets, if we leave our father, and if we follow, Jesus says, "I will teach you to fish for people." You see, disciples learn to become not only followers, but leaders – we are trained to become those who lead others to the light of the world. And the idea here is not that we have to have a degree in theology to do this work of God. Each of us know people who need Jesus. And each of us can say, "come and see," what's going on. We are supposed to go into the land of Zebulun and Naphtali – into the land of pitch-black, into the land of deep darkness, into the land of all nations to share the light of God. We are called to share the good news that Jesus came to proclaim – we are called to tell others that Jesus came to heal us all.

Now it may be that you aren't sure if you live in a land like Zebulan and Nephtali. A lot of us may tend to spend time with other faithful followers of Jesus -- and that is an awesome thing to be a part of a community of believers. But we are also called to be part of the world outside the walls of this church. And so to assure you that Jesus's call to fish for people is still relevant today, I want you to know a few statistics from an October 2019 survey done by Pew Research:

Generational breakdown of US population unaffiliated with a religion

Silent Generation	age 75-92	10% unaffiliated with a religion
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Boomers	age 56-74	17% unaffiliated
Gen X	age 40-56	25% unaffiliated
Millennials	24-39	40% unaffiliated

Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019 article

You can see that we have a generation gap. You can see that significant numbers of people in our community do not have a body of believers to love them and support them and to help them come to a transformational relationship with God. And these numbers are important because they represent real people who don't know about the love of God. These numbers represent people like our children, our neighbors and people right here in our community. And this generation gap is growing every year. Nationwide, church attendance is going steadily down. Over the next four weeks we are going to be challenging you to be invitational in sharing God's love---to be intentional about noticing people who may be part of these statistics -- the people who have no religious affiliation or who have had such a negative experience with church that they just say that they are done with church.

You see, it is up to each one of us to be relentless about **noticing** God's people and **being the presence** of God in the world. We must first **receive** the light, and then we must **be** the light of God in a world where there is darkness. When we are relentlessly focused on people outside the walls of the church we pray for them, and we seek out every opportunity to communicate God's love to people --- sometimes we might even have to use words. Part of casting our nets wide for Jesus involves keeping our eyes open all the time -- every day-- in every place for people who might need to experience the love of God.

At work.

At school.

At home.

In the community.

So, would you think about all the people whose faces you see in a day. Think about all the relationships you already have. And then, I ask you to continuously/relentlessly think about how you might share God's love. How might you develop relationships with new people? How might you invite others to come and see what kind of new life Christ might have in store for them?

So friends, I am here today first to let **you** know that if you are living in pitch-black, if you need to be healed, then come and follow Jesus. And second, won't you live into this calling to share the light of Christ with the world.

I promise you there is someone here today and there is someone out there who needs to be healed.

There is someone here today and someone out there who is living in the darkness of hatred or anger.

There is someone here today and there is someone out there who is living in the darkness of fear or unforgiveness.

There is someone here today and someone out there who is living in the darkness of depression or grief or loneliness.

There is someone here today and someone out there who is living in the darkness of addiction to drugs or alcohol or pornography or consumerism or a million other things that can draw our attention away from God.

In fact, I think there are a lot of someone's here today and a lot of someone's out there who need a lot more of Jesus in their lives. I know I do.

Here's how it works -- when the light of the world dawns in our lives, then we can grab ahold of someone else's hand and say -- come and see! May we receive more and more of the light of Christ. And may we be the light of Christ. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So my challenge for you this week is very specific. I ask you to pray about one person in your life that you might want to share God's love with. Would you get that person's face in your mind and just say a prayer for that person every day this week. Maybe every time you brush your teeth or when you eat lunch -- would you let that be a reminder to pray for this one person. And would you ask God to teach you to reach out to that one person with God's love. My guess is that if we seek God, God will inspire us in some really unexpected ways. God might inspire us to invite someone to an event at church, or to help serve at Last Sunday breakfast, or to come to worship. But God might also inspire us to offer a kind word, or to send a card or a text saying you are thinking about them or to take them to lunch. God will lead the way -- we are simply called to be faithful. Let's practice being relentless and intentional about sharing God's love.