

Text: Mark 1:14-20

Since the early days of the Church the fish has been a symbol of the Christian faith. Maybe it started the day Jesus called a bunch of fisherman to become fishers of people, as we just read in our Gospel, but for whatever reason, the symbol stuck. The Christian fish symbol called an "ichthus" in Greek, was an acronym in the Greek for, "Jesus Christ God's Son Savior" (Iēsous Khristos Theou Huios, Sōtēr). Many of you no doubt know about the history of the early Christians in Greece and Rome when, under persecution prior to the Edict of Milan, they were forced to meet in secret and would scratch the ichthus fish symbol at places of Christian meetings and worship or at the homes of fellow Christians. At that time, the ichthus had a deep and powerful meaning, because to live as a Christian or to participate in Christian worship, was to risk your life.

This is still the case in some places in the world today but it's certainly not the case in the west anymore. And still the ichthus fish symbol lives on. But how very different the ichthus, this Jesus fish symbol, is for us today in America. In fact, you can see the ichthus everywhere: adorning car bumpers, in business ads in the yellow pages, on key chains, bracelets, and even on email signatures. It carries no sense of risk in our culture, it has become commonplace, respectable, and even a means to get customers when used in advertising. As a complete reversal of the use of the original ichthus, it has even become a source of humor in the ongoing bumper sticker dialogues containing the ichthus fish that you may have seen. First we had the ichthus fish with the Greek letters in it and then with the word "Jesus" inside the fish, later we saw a reaction to the ichthus fish with the word "Darwin" appearing inside it. In response to that came an ichthus with the word "truth" eating the "Darwin" fish. And the final rather humorous retaliation by the Darwinians was a dinosaur eating the "truth" that was eating the Darwin fish. We've also seen the "Evolve" fish with tiny feet and the "Gefilte" fish and even the "Fish and Chips" fish.... all in that ichthus symbol on the back of cars. As I was researching the ichthus bumper phenomenon, I came across a sticker I liked best of all that reads: "Do you follow JESUS this closely?"

The point of course is that there is a wide discrepancy from then to now, at least in the west, about what it means to be a Christian. And the discrepancy lies of course, not in the symbol itself, but what it has come to mean to be a Christian today, in stark contrast to what it meant in the early church or in places where Christians are currently being persecuted or killed. We Americans

easily forget the cost of discipleship and the label and badge of "Christian," just like the symbol of the ichthus, is often used as a badge of pride or prestige, not of humility, sacrifice, or suffering.

So, what does it mean for us today when we call ourselves Christians? What was it that Jesus called his followers to be and do when he invited them to become fishers of people? And what does it mean for us to say yes to that call now, right here in 2018 in America? T.W. Manson, a scholar from the University of Manchester says that the term Jesus used for his followers implied discipleship and even apprenticeship, which differed from the Rabbinical tradition of the day.

He writes, "The finished products of the Rabbinical schools were learned biblical scholars and sound and competent lawyers. The life of a Talmud was made up of study of the sacred writings, attendance on lectures, and discussion of difficult passages or cases. Discipleship as Jesus conceived it was not a theoretical discipline of this sort, but a practical task to which men (sic) were called to give themselves and all their energies. Their work was not study but practice. Fishermen were to become fishers of men, peasants were to be laborers in God's vineyard or God's harvest field. And Jesus was their master not so much as a teacher of right doctrine, but rather as the master-craftsman whom they were to follow and imitate. Discipleship was not matriculation in a Rabbinical College but apprenticeship to the work of the Kingdom."

This past week at our Noon Mass we commemorated St. Antony of Egypt, a man who certainly understood the concept of apprenticeship with Jesus. When you read his life story you learn that one of the reasons monasticism developed in the 300's and why so many Christians flocked to the deserts at that time, was because they had lived as Christians upon threat of death and constant persecution for so long, that when it became perfectly legal to be a Christian under Constantine in 312, they simply did not believe that mere attendance at church was a sufficient sacrifice to be a true Christian. And it's no wonder they thought this: they were very aware that Jesus and the apostles themselves had made the ultimate sacrifice...they gave their lives for the sake of God's call: why wouldn't his followers continue to make such major sacrifices for God?

I know I personally experienced something of a shift in my own thinking after I lived in Thailand with missionaries in 1990 and again in 1992. While living in

Chiang Mai I encountered Christians who had fled from Burma because they were being persecuted so severely that their water sources and food had been cut off. I met Christians who had risked everything to smuggle Bibles into China at the risk of their livelihood and freedom and even the death penalty. I met Christians that literally gave up everything they owned and knew in order to start a new life and follow Jesus. Their witness changed me and the concept I had of what it meant to be a Christian. So, you can imagine my surprise when I returned to the United States in early 1993 and attended church for the first time after nearly a year overseas and was asked to weigh in on an important decision they were making that day. I wondered all morning what the important decision would be...given my recent context I imagined all kinds of serious but essential concerns. To my surprise, the important decision was whether the young adult group should give up its current meeting space to the young families group because it was closer the Nursery. The discussion was heated and tense – someone finally looked at me and said, “What do you think?” My eyes were wide with disbelief as I responded, “Sure, make the change, I don’t think it really matters too much.” They shook their head at me and the conversation continued as though I’d never spoken. I left church that day shaken and confused: was this what American Christianity had become I wondered? Were these the issues the Church thought to be important? Important enough to fight over? I cried that afternoon because I felt like my church had lost our love and passion for what mattered when we had been called to first follow Jesus. I couldn’t imagine what my Thai friends would have said or thought.

The Christian faith is still very much about discipleship: even though it’s culturally acceptable to wear Christian symbols and labels today in America, it doesn’t change what we’ve actually been called to do and be as apprentices to the one who sacrificed everything for us. And we easily get our focus off track.

I am reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was a Lutheran pastor and part of the resistance against Hitler in Nazi Germany. He lead a seminary of students illegally until the Gestapo shut it down in 1937 and then joined in the resistance movement by helping Jews escape Nazi oppression. He eventually took part in a plot to assassinate Hitler as well. But his resistance efforts were discovered, and he was sent to a concentration camp in Flossenber. Bonhoeffer was killed there in 1945, just a month before Germany’s surrender. He wrote a book called “The Cost of Discipleship - it’s a book I can recommend

wholeheartedly to anyone who takes the call to follow Jesus seriously. Clearly Bonhoeffer understood what it meant to follow in Jesus’s footsteps and was absolutely willing to risk his life to do so. He knew that resisting Hitler and saving his Jewish brothers and sisters was his calling as a Christian. He wrote this, “When Christ calls a person, He bids them come and die.” “And if we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand? To answer this question we shall have to go to him, for only he knows the answer. Only (he) knows the journey’s end.” We don’t know where it may lead when we say “yes” to the call of discipleship. The fishermen who left their nets when Jesus called them to “Follow me and I will make fishers of people” didn’t know what would happen. But they forsook their nets anyway and followed the call anyway and became the first disciples.

We, you and I have been called to follow wherever God leads. We are called to be disciples, to apprentice with a teacher that asks us to be fishers of people, to do the work of God’s Kingdom in some unlikely ways. I dare say it will likely cost us more than the risk of displaying an ichthus on our bumpers or giving up our favorite meeting space. Because to truly follow God’s call can be costly, it can require sacrifices we never imagined would be asked of us, just like none of us can imagine the sacrifices that loving another human being may ask of us. We do it anyway for the sake of love and the call to love and follow where God has lead the way.

What is God calling you to? What risks might be involved? What sacrifices are you willing to make for the sake of the call to follow Jesus? It might be the sacrifice of time, of ego, of money, of comfort, of security, ...it might even be your life. Whatever it is, when given up for the sake of following the call God has given you – it will be worth it. As Bonhoeffer wrote, “...we do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy.”

AMEN.