

Don't Fritter Away Opportunity for New Creation

By: Larry Greenfield

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Too cryptic. That's the sense I often have when reading the Gospel of Mark.

By the time the reader starts the 16th verse, Jesus has already been baptized by John in the Jordan River, survived 40 days of temptation by Satan in the wilderness with wild beasts and comforting angels, gotten the news of the Baptizer's arrest, and proclaimed the central message of his own ministry: "The time is fulfilled, and the dominion of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. "

Whew!

Yes, in a sense, it's all one really needs to know. But there's something enriching to have some genealogical info about the savior of the world (Matthew), narratives about what happened in the year before Jesus' birth (Luke), the birth stories themselves with a pastoral call from nearby shepherds (Luke again) and the visit of the Magi (Matthew again), and a philosophical discourse that opens up the meaning of it all (John).

But these add-ons are evidently only fluff for cryptic Mark.

So we're not surprised that this writer boils down the beckoning of the first disciples to just four verses:

"Walking along the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishers. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people". And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, Jesus saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired help, and followed him." (Mark 1:16-20)

Although Matthew copies Mark almost word-for-word, both Luke and John give us much fuller (but different) accounts of these elective events.

My impulse is to fill in what Mark (and Matthew) leave out – to let the imagination have its play. It might go something like this:

One day while walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus caught a glimpse of two fishers repeatedly throwing their net out into the water. Sometimes, when they drew in their net, there was nothing to retrieve; other times the two fishers would gather a few fish and toss them

into a pail. But they just kept doing the same thing over and over again: casting out the net, pulling it in, fetching whatever fish had been trapped, and then starting the process once again.

Jesus stopped and started talking to the two fishers, who he found out were brothers, named Simon and Andrew. Finally, he asked them: “Why are you frittering away your life doing the same thing hour after hour, day after day, month after month, year after year? What would you think about forgoing all of this and following me, and fishing for people instead? What would you think of joining me in announcing some amazingly good news about what God is doing to bring great change to the world and asking people to give up their past ways of doing things and to become a part of the new community that God is creating?” It didn’t take long for them to make a shared decision. Simon and Andrew dropped their nets and chose to follow Jesus.

Just a little ways down that same seashore, Jesus saw a crew of fishers in a boat and he went to talk with them. They weren’t fishing at the time, but mending their nets, which was tedious work. After some conversation, Jesus asked them – just as he had asked Simon and Andrew – why they were frittering their life away with this boring work; and he invited them, too, to follow him and become menders not of nets but of people’s lives, fishers of people for a radically different kind of meaningful life in a community of justice and peace and reconciliation that God was already creating. And two of those in the boat, also brothers, left their father Zebedee and the rest of the crew and, like Simon and Andrew, followed Jesus. Their names were James and John.

That’s the way I’d have written the story, with a little editing here and there.

Whether one goes with the original or some version that’s a product of the imagination, the point is essentially the same: Most of the world’s people—most of us—are caught up in frittering their/our lives away. Even when we make changes in our lives, those changes so often turn out to be just tinkering changes that lead us back to frittering our lives away in some different manner.

And it isn’t that we just find ourselves in this predicament in our personal and family and social lives. We find that this is our situation in our public lives as well, whether we’re on the cusp of change out of shame or promise.

Here in Illinois, we know all about both shame and promise: the change that will have to come from the shame of a governor who it seems pretty clearly abused power, and the promise of change for our nation and the world that one of our own brings to the country’s presidency.

In the state, the likelihood is that some tinkering will take place—probably as little as politically possible—but we’ll manage to find a lot of new ways to waste the public’s purse for the personal gain of a few, new ways to deny poor kids the kind of education that will give them a chance to break out of the cycle of poverty, new ways to leave families without the kind of health care they need, new ways to create hurdles for jobs and services and opportunities they need to become full participants in society. We’ll probably fritter away the best chance to re-form, to transform,

our political system itself into something that resembles an operating democracy.

In our nation and the world, the outlook seems more promising with a change of administrations. But for all the reversals that are pledged on so many fronts, the political and economic paradigms still remain fundamentally the same. Huge amounts of money will be spent to salvage an economy structured on consumerism and self-interest. Immense efforts will be undertaken to restore the dominant place of the United States in the world's commerce and political maneuvering. Significant endeavors will be devoted to making sure that an imbalance of power be maintained in places like the Middle East so that domestic constituencies can be mollified.

Needed changes being put in place? Yes, even important ones.

But on a grander scale of things? I'm afraid we're just tinkering with the systems that are in place. Frittering away the opportunities for a new created order.

The sad fact is that those of us who think that we have accepted the invitation of Jesus to follow him are so deeply involved in the tinkering.

And, therefore, we are frittering away our personal and public lives.

So maybe more than doing an updated, imaginative and expanded version of Jesus' call to his disciples, we need to listen again to what, cryptically stated, he said was at stake:

The time is fulfilled, and the dominion of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.

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