

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Mending Broken Places

Mark 1:14-20

January 24

Friends, it is good to be in the pulpit again, to be back in the sanctuary worshipping again with friends and colleagues. It's good to be here. I'm grateful for those who have faithfully and eloquently filled this space over these last few weeks. They've been wonderful. I've been in class. It was zoom class, but it was my last class. My last class in my doctoral coursework. I now begin the writing phase which has its own challenges plenty, but at least it's not zoom class. I know so many of you can relate to that sentiment.

You're tired of zoom teaching; you're tired of zoom learning and zoom meetings. You're tired of online worship and zoom Sunday school and zoom youth group and zoom family reunions. I get it. Boy, do I get it. I'm tired of it too. But we all keep doing the best we can in every aspect of life that is in front of us. Even in church life, we are doing the best we can, and on the whole, I think we're doing pretty well. The alternative at this time is for a church is to be cavalier in our care for our neighbors. And we won't do that. That's not who we are. The alternative is to deny the reality of the challenges we face. And we won't do that either.

From day 1 of this pandemic situation, we have prioritized care for our neighbors, thoughtful informed decisions about church gatherings, and creative responses to new limitations. We had little imagination we'd be at this for this long. But I'm awfully proud of how this congregation has done these things. You've been amazing. Now, as they say, the light is just dimly there at the end of the tunnel. Some of you are starting to get vaccines. I celebrate with you every time I hear that good news. We should ring the bell outside every time one of you gets to the front of the line for the vaccine.

More of you are still trying to get them and are experiencing the frustration of the system that means you can't yet. But the day will come when you'll find your place at the front of the line and the business end of the needle. On that day, as you get the coronavirus vaccine, give a word thanks to God for everyone whose brilliance and dedication made this possible this quickly. Give thanks to God, the giver of all good gifts, the God of healing and of hope.

Healing and Hope. That seems to be what our texts are about this morning. In our readings this morning from Jonah and from the Gospel of Mark, God calls people just when the past and future hang in the balance, into redemptive, healing mission of hope. God calls them to join in repairing the past and the present brokenness of the world, to speak words of truth and hope to friends and enemies, to trust God to take them far beyond anything they could have imagined. God calls them to mend the frayed fabric of the world.

Jonah wanted nothing to do with any of this, at all. God said go to your enemies in Nineveh and lead them to repent. And Jonah said, no thanks, I'm headed the other direction. Even when given a second chance, Jonah only did the barest minimum that God asked him to do. And yet,

it was enough. God used the shortest, grumpiest sermon in history to lead the whole city of Nineveh to redemption. Jonah wasn't happy about the call; he wasn't happy with the outcome. He is the image of begrudging ministry, the Bernie meme of the Old Testament. And yet, look what God did even through him.

The fishermen in Mark's Gospel, on the other hand, are an image of faithful, immediate, whole-hearted response to the call of God. That's one of Mark's favorite words, immediate, and these guys are emblems of that. Jesus calls. They immediately drop what they're doing and follow him. "The time is now; the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe," and they did. At the moment Jesus called two of them, Simon and Andrew were fishing. The other two, James and John, were mending the nets. You get the idea they were hunched over, intently focused on repairing the frayed, worn places on the massive net when they hear Jesus's voice.

The first people Jesus called as disciples were people who knew how to mend broken things. There was no buying new nets every time one tore. They tore all the time. There was no artificial engineered shortcut. It was just the hard work of the mending. There was no getting around it. If there's a small tear in one link, it will weaken the others around it until the gap is so wide the net falters as a net. For fishermen such as the first disciples, mending nets was just as important as casting them into the sea and pulling them up hopefully full of a day's catch. If the net is broken, there's no fish. Fishermen spent just about as much time every day mending the nets as actually casting them into the water. Mending is a craft that requires skill, learned by experience, taught by fathers and mothers and theirs before them. Mending nets requires commitment to the task no matter how hopeless the task seemed.

At such a time as this, the metaphor of mending nets may be just the image we need to help us find our place in God's redemptive, healing mission in the world.

When I was younger, I worked with a ministry in south Florida. Most days, I did construction work on homes wrecked by Hurricane Andrew. For a small number of people, we were a big part of putting their lives back together. It was hot, hard work so I usually wore shorts and often just wore the same pair of shorts day after day. What difference did it make? The shorts I wore, though, grew a little threadbare. A little too threadbare, but it was a job site, so it could go one more day. I kept telling myself that day after day. Then one day working on a roof, I caught the seat of those shorts on a nail and ripped them wide open. I mean a big rip, really tore it good, like cloth flapping down the seat like those old cartoon bib overalls. And a church volunteer group was scheduled to show up anytime that day. So, I did what any impatient, poor 20-something year old would do, I went to the office and grabbed a stapler, and I stapled the flap closed. I stapled those shorts good. Now, this might sound like a temporary fix in a tight spot, but actually, you know, it worked well enough, and I didn't want to go buy new shorts, so I just kept wearing them. Threw them in the wash, the staples held pretty well. An extra staple here or there from time to time on those Frankenstein shorts kept up necessary decorum. I kept going that way until Jenny came to visit from Texas. We were engaged. She was appalled. And the shorts were retired.

Even I knew that a few staples doesn't equal really getting in there with a needle and thread, really repairing the thing that's torn. That takes time; it takes some skill, it takes some patience. Mostly it takes an intention to do it. But I was too impatient, definitely not skilled, and really didn't care all that much, let's be honest. It was just a pair of old work shorts that I didn't want to throw out. Really mending broken things, like work shorts or fishing nets or relationships or communities or a nation requires patience; it requires dedication. Mostly it requires caring about the broken thing enough to mend the broken places.

Of all the people in the world he could have called, the first disciples Jesus called weren't preachers eloquent for their rhetoric. They weren't scholars, skilled in philosophical reflection. They weren't leaders of men, capable of organizing and building institutions. They weren't warriors, strong and brave to take the hill and crush their enemies. They weren't priests or people with mystical connection with the divine. They were fishermen, which meant really one main thing: Jesus called men who were at work mending broken nets.

Now, I don't know anything much about fishing or nets, not anything more than you do, I'm sure. But it seems pretty clear that a net is just a whole set of connections, each depending on the others for strength of the whole. If one frays, they all suffer. If one thread breaks, the others around it will too. It's all a web of interconnected strength.

Consider for a moment each of our lives as knots or nodes in a web like that. Each point is connected to others in four directions. Can you see that? You can sketch it out and see how it works, how this image works. Each point connected in four relationships. Each is different, but they all tie together. In a net there are four connections for each knot, but in the web of life there are countless, endless connections for each person. And each can be torn. We know the pain of that very well. Believing the Gospel is believing that those relationships in the web of life, by grace, can be mended. This nation, this world we live in could use a little mending these days, a little healing.

It seems to me that this is the work of this season. The old, wise writer of Ecclesiastes said in life there's a time for everything, including a time to tear and a time to mend. Well, the last year was a time of the tearing of a lot—health, communities, families, careers. Last year tore people out of their ever-lovin' minds. We've been drawn and quartered this last year. We've been chopped and diced. Now it's time to begin to repair the broken places. It's time to mend.

What needs mending? Goodness, so much. Our relationship with the earth, for starters. We've damaged our common home about as thoroughly as we possibly could have. Time to heal those wounds. What else? The relationship between rich and poor in a modern economy that severs them farther and father apart. The relationship between black and white in beloved community. The relationship between friends and family divided from one another over truth and lies. What needs mending? In all of this, our relationship with God and our faith in Jesus Christ, the Great Physician who heals.

It's understandable, in its way, why so many would turn aside from and reject the hard work of mending what's broken. It's hard. It's understandable why so many more would just try to

MacGyver things back together with duct tape or a stapler. It's easier. But not for us. Not for the people Jesus calls. Jesus's disciples follow him into the places of human pain and suffering, right to the broken places. They do so with courage and humility and hope. We carry no sword, but the Word of God. We carry no staff, but a needle and thread that though it looks too weak, is strong with God's strength to repair the tears, and though looks too foolish, is God's wisdom that heal the tears.

A time to mend is never a time when it's already mended. Remember, it was just when John the Baptist was arrested that Jesus proclaimed, the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus does not wait for a convenient time, a safe time, or an easy time. And he doesn't wait until someone else has done the work. He calls men and women to take up whatever they can find: a sewing needle, a soldering iron, duct tape or staples... and words of compassion and forgiveness and understanding, patience and humility and truth and love, and he says, "follow me into the broken heart of the world, even if it kills me."

A time to mend. Did the inauguration of a new president repair the fabric of our nation? Maybe. It didn't hurt, at least to change the rhetoric, but maybe even more, it was the words of Amanda Gorman, the young African American poet that began to stitch the torn fabric of a nation back together. She said, "Being American is more than a pride we inherit, It's the past we step into, and how we repair it."

That is daily, hunched over, patient, local work. A new president, a stunning poet. Maybe God is using them. But this I know: the ministry of reconciliation is ultimately the work first of the church. In this season, it may just be our first work, to reweave the torn fabric of our world through the daily, hunched over, patient work of repairing the relationships-- between humans and the earth in this web of life, between rich and poor in justice and mercy, between black and white in beloved community, between friends and families divided from one another over truth and lies.

"God through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave to us the ministry of reconciliation... God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5.14-20)

Fishermen will tell you that you can't mend the whole net at once; you mend one stitch at a time, one thread at a time, one act of reconciliation at a time, one frayed relationship at a time, one life at a time. And along the way, you discover it's your life, your beautiful, fragile life, it's your life that's being stitched back together in Christ.

Thanks be to God for healing and for hope.