

“Disruption Can Be a Good Thing”

Mark 1:14–20

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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I have had a longtime fascination with the story of calling we have read from Mark 1. As a teenager who had not grown up in the church, then had his life transformed, I found something familiar in this story of dramatic change for four fishermen. In college, I wrote a song about this story and performed it hundreds of times. I am told a fellow band member later recorded my song. I often tried to envision the lakeside where Jesus stood and the water where Simon and Andrew, James and John fished. I wondered how much it might be like Lake Norman where I learned to fish. And then, I was able to go there in the summer of 2008 and walk along the shore, swim in the water at Tabgha, just below Capernaum, and discover that it is somewhat like Lake Norman.

It is a scene I have reflected on for decades, preached on more times than I can count, considered from just about every angle imaginable, but reading the story again this week, I am not sure I have ever fully absorbed just how disruptive it is. The fishermen are called to what turns out to be a world-altering path. Even they come to realize this after Jesus’ death and resurrection. But in this moment, they are leaving everything they know to follow an itinerant preacher with no formal education and no guarantee that anyone else will follow him. They are leaving their home and work, their friends and family. Indeed, I don’t know why I never noticed this before, but I was startled by the statement that James and John left their father Zebedee in the boat.

Maybe it’s because I am reading now as a father of grown children who have left and moved far away — though not as far as some of your children — but the image of Zebedee in that boat with only the hired men, his sons he always thought would take over the family business having jumped ship to follow some strange religious leader, is startling. How must he feel right now? Like the parents of an older member in another setting who left Davidson College many years ago to travel with

the Glen Miller Band, I should think — though he eventually returned to run the family business — or like the parents of anyone who leaves the solid footing of home, work or school on what seems like a whim for an uncertain future. It is unexpected, unwanted, and downright disruptive!

And yet, such is the nature of discipleship, this matter of following Jesus, which lies at the very heart of our faith. Christian faith involves belief. Jesus says so. Believe in the good news, he says in the reading from Mark; believe in the Gospel, the message that the time is fulfilled and God's reign has come near in him. But his basic invitation to disciples here and everywhere else involves more than cognitive belief; it involves deep and abiding trust in him and his way of life. "Follow me," he says, "and I will make you fish for people." Not just, "Believe in me," but "Follow me," he says over and over again. He doesn't just want people to believe that he brings a new way of loving God and neighbor. He wants people to love God and neighbor in a new way.

This is disruptive because it involves change, a complete reorientation of life, what the Bible calls repentance. "Repent and believe in the good news," Jesus says, repent not just in the limited moral sense of regretting a wrong — though this is part of the process — but in the larger sense of changing one's way of life.

I have shared with some of you a story about something my father witnessed while training at Sandhurst long before his SAS days. Men marched toward a pond dutifully, getting closer and closer because the Drill Sergeant had a stuttering problem and could not get out the command, "To the rear march." In fact, the first men marched into the pond knee deep before he finally got it out, but they changed their course then. That is what repentance is — moving in a different direction, changing our path, even if we nearly drown before we do.

The first disciples must change everything in a moment, leave all they have known to follow Jesus wherever he goes, including the cross. We too must change, perhaps not in the exactly the same way, but change nonetheless. Some, like me, who grow up outside the church, experience dramatic change when we first believe. But even those who grow up in the church experience something different in baptism. And

the truth is change is required not just at the beginning of the journey but all along the way because none of us ever embraces completely the reign of justice and love that Jesus brings near.

We know what it involves — loving our neighbor as our self, forgiving those who wrong us (rather than seeking revenge), welcoming the stranger, befriending the outcast, praying for our enemy (personal, national and political). We know it's about kindness and compassion, gentleness and humility, patience and respect for others, all others. But knowing isn't doing. We are ever works-in-progress when it comes to following Jesus. So, there is a need for some disruption not just at the very beginning of the journey but many places along the way.

I think of a story connected to the church I served for eleven years in Winston-Salem. In the 1960s, Dr. Noffsinger and his wife, who worked with the youth, were trying to lead the church to engage critical concerns like integration, but it was not an easy endeavor. After the Knollwood youth did just about the worst thing imaginable with an African-American youth group — they went swimming together, God forbid — Jack walked into a deacons meeting only to discover that these servant leaders of the church of Jesus Christ were discussing a motion to fire the preacher and all the staff with him because of this “incident.”

Jack never told me this story, a deacon who had been there did. He said that after much discussion, they finally asked the preacher what he had to say for himself. Jack, who had been a Marine chaplain at the Battle of Iwo Jima, paused for a moment and then said, “You know, there were so many people getting killed at Iwo, I don't remember what color of skin the boys who raised that flag had.” There was a long, heavy silence, after which the deacon chair said, “Well, I guess that's all we need to say about that.” It was an astute response, but the story highlights just how difficult the challenge was, how disruptive.

Later, at a church conference, as tensions continued to mount, a lay leader whom I knew thirty years later to be a warmhearted soul, spoke in a way that shifted the spirit of the church. He said, “You know that I have as much or more feeling about this whole Negro business (the terminology of the day) as any of you, but I have never felt that it was pleasing to our Lord. Our pastor and his wife are only trying to help our

young people and all of us to find out how Jesus wants us to act in all of this change that is coming to us. Let's just pray for them and try to help as we try to find what the Lord wants us to do about all this (*The Spirit of Jesus*, Jack Noffsinger, p 162).”

It was a watershed moment in the life of that church. People knew in their hearts this man was right. It was not easy. It was disruptive. It threatened beliefs people held their entire lives and required them to change, to repent. But it was also redemptive and necessary. Faithful discipleship demanded change, and once they made it, their lives were enriched, and their witness became more effective. They could invite others through their coffeehouse ministry and other ways to join a community of changed and changing people because they were changed and changing. Taking discipleship and the disruptions that go with it seriously is critical not just for our lives but for our witness to Christ.

I have had this view reinforced repeatedly while doing partnership mission work with the Harrells in Kenya. At first glance, Kenya is a country that has had a strong mission presence, including a Baptist presence, for many years. Sam's parents were missionaries there, while Mel's parents were in Uganda. There is a Baptist Convention with many Baptist institutions. But though the older Harrells and Carrols were some of the finest missionaries ever to bear the name of Jesus, there have been many people in Kenya who talk a lot about Jesus, but do not live like him. What is needed today more than anything is people who will give witness through their love and compassion, their aid to the sick and the poor, their honesty and integrity. We might say the same here.

But it's not just about living in a way that matches our words, and thus helping our verbal witness; it's about living in a way that extends God's reign. I came across an interesting insight this week. New Testament scholar Osvaldo Vena explores Jesus' statement that his disciples will fish for people (*workingpreacher.org*). When fish are taken out of the water, they die, he observes, and when we embrace Christ, we die to our former way of life, to sin and less noble paths. But does Christ really call us to leave the water, a symbol of the chaos of the world, completely, or is this more of a catch and release enterprise? We are called away from the chaos of the world in order to be made whole

by Christ, and then we are sent back into the world to change it for the better, to extend God's reign.

Quaker Thomas Kelly put it this way.

Paradoxically this total Instruction proceeds in two opposing directions at once. We are torn loose from earthly attachments and ambitions – *contemptus mundi*. And we are quickened to a divine but painful concern for the world – *amor mundi*. (God) plucks the world out of our hearts, loosening the chains of attachment. And (God) hurls the world into our hearts, where we and (God) together carry it in infinitely tender love. (*A Testament of Devotion*, p. 47)

That is our calling — not to abandon the struggles of this world but to engage them with God, to make the world more loving and just, more kind and gentle for all. At any time, it would seem obvious that this is an ongoing task with many disruptions. For the world is filled with hardship and we are always growing in our awareness of need. But in this time of so much struggle with COVID-19, racial injustice, and political division, it feels like faithful discipleship will require even more in the way of disruption.

At the presidential inauguration this week, the bright young poet Amanda Gorman said many memorable things. In light of the struggles of recent weeks, she said we are not broken as a nation, just unfinished. That is a concept that squares with biblical thinking. We are ever works-in-progress. Discipleship is ongoing. And she said we look not to what is between us but to what is ahead of us — not to our differences and divisions but to our challenges and opportunities.

It is a hopeful vision, but it requires change on our part, a complete reorientation of life, repentance. And it requires this of all of us. It's not just that others need to change; we all need to change if we are to live together more peaceably. That sounds disruptive, but disruption can be a good thing, especially when it allows us to become more and more like the people God has called us to be.