

Why fishermen?  
January 27, 2007  
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Why fishermen? Why not carpenters? After all, Jesus himself had been one. Why not farmers? Given the way Jesus told parables about seeds among weeds, he must have known the agricultural way of life pretty well. Why not merchants? They knew how to spot a good deal, and then convince others to buy. If anyone knew the art of persuasion, they did. But Jesus, even though he never baited a hook, chose fishermen to be the first to follow.

These two sets of brothers were not *poor* fisherfolk. Actually, fishing on the Sea of Galilee had developed into a *major* industry, often run by extended families that had their own partnerships. Jonah and his sons, Simon and Andrew made up one such business; Zebedee and his sons, James and John comprised another one.

No business can survive without strong leadership and teamwork. So these gentlemen must have been

Why fishermen?  
January 27, 2007  
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

effective at what they did. They also must have been tough, fighting squalls and sleepless nights and hauling in nets day after day. And they also must have been self-reliant. No *golden parachutes* were out there to save them or their families from economic hardship.

What is perhaps most striking about Jesus' choosing fisherfolk to follow him is this: *they had made their living by feeding people from the realm of the unseen*. Jesus had seen them set out from the shore in hope and determination to find a *treasure* that was invisible to the eye, hidden beneath the waves. They were searching for what was not apparent, but nevertheless present. This was their job day after day.

Jesus felt that the kingdom reality was not *locatable*, was neither *here* nor *there*, but that the Kingdom of the Father was spread out all over the world, but people do not see it. Fishermen would have understood that thought. Peter or James could not say

Why fishermen?  
January 27, 2007  
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

a school of fish was *here* or *there*, but that fish were spread out all over the lake, but people did not see them. They dealt with making the unseen seen. That's the way they made their living.

From the time when Jesus moved from Nazareth to the lake village of Capernaum he must have witnessed this fisherfolk dynamic. Maybe after weeks or months of observing or talking with the brothers, he issued them a terse invitation. They were asked to make a decision that surely must have made their families quake: *leave your nets, follow me, and we will go fish for people. We will catch people for the Kingdom of God.*

The Gospels say that five of them turn away from the village by the lake, and begin the long climb up to the hill country in the north. Fisherfolk and ex-carpenter turn inland to fish for people. No boat, no nets, no saw or hammer, no apparent expertise among them all, but

Why fishermen?  
January 27, 2007  
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

they go. They believe that the unseen can be made manifest to feed the seen.

In my days in Boarding School a long, long time ago, I was exposed to the poet Robert Frost and his writings have been at the top of my list ever since. His *The Road Less Traveled*, is one of my favorites: it reads, *I shall be telling this with a sigh, somewhere ages and ages hence: two roads diverged in a wood and I.....I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.* The first community of the New Creation had been formed and was on its way to change the world. And *it* made all the difference.

What were they going to say to all these people, the ones they were supposed to catch, after they said hello? What were they going to teach them? Jesus had to have inculcated in the disciples a change in their understanding of God. Not a *new* God, but the God of Israel *rightly* understood. A God of unlimited mercy

Why fishermen?  
January 27, 2007  
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

and grace. A God who was close, who could and should be addressed with unprecedented familiarity. A God whose single cause in the world was human well being. A God on the side of everyone, but especially on the side of sinners and the poor, the sick and the discarded. A God who shattered all hierarchies of righteousness and preeminence. And this God was not far away, but *close*, as close as your nose is to your face.

*The Kingdom of the Father is healing love.* This is the Gospel message. To back up this teaching, Jesus and his followers healed the sick. Deeds back up words. Is God *really* like this? Can Jesus mediate this reality to *me*? Put forth your wholehearted trust in him and find out, the disciples seem to be saying, as we have found it to be true in our own lives.

Hence, these early fishers of people were not to preach, at least in the traditional sense in which

Why fishermen?  
January 27, 2007  
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

everyone would sit down and listen to them. They were not to instruct, or exhort, to interpret Scripture, to *do theology*, or to establish doctrine. They were to bear *testimony*. To declare in the wisdom and power of the Spirit, and by wholly being themselves, what it meant to be caught up in the life of Jesus in *his* Kingdom power and glory.

The dogma of Jesus, if I may call it that, and that of his co-fisherfolk, was to become a child. *Become children of Abba together, through the Spirit*. Those who did, found new birth. Those who did not continued to live with an old dogma that kept them from joy, whether they knew it or not.

**AMEN.**