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They left their nets  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 and Matthew 4:12-23

Have you ever heard of “sole theology”? It is not something we speak of a lot in the United Church of Canada. But it is in fact very popular. Now, I know what you’re thinking. Soul theology must be about the immortality of the soul. Or perhaps it’s the theology about what happens to our souls when we die. Or perhaps it’s something really disturbing like what’s going on with our souls while we are having a nap. You might imagine that soul theology has to do with the separation - the dualism - between body and soul. You might imagine that you should just get started on your grocery list right now while I wax philosophical about a number of eternal vagaries.

But before you start that grocery list I should perhaps point out that “sole” in this case is spelled s-o-l-e.

[image: soles of feet]

I’m not talking about your eternal soul. I’m talking about your feet! And why are feet so important? Because we do lots of things with our feet. We walk - obviously, but we do other things too. For example, we vote with our feet. And we express our theology and our faith in action. Which often involves choosing to walk somewhere as the first step.

[image: walking barefoot]

Sole theology is about walking our pathway of faith.

Consider the story we just read from Matthew where Jesus calls the four fishers to be the first disciples. The fishers were busy working when Jesus tells them to follow him. And they do. They leave their nets and use their feet to follow Jesus. They follow a new pathway of living. The fishers follow their feet. The fishers know all about sole theology!

[image: sole fish]

They also knew about this sort of sole.

[image: plaice fish]

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But this is not the time or the place for that conversation.

I always love the story of Jesus calling the fishers. It was simple, quick, clean. The story suggests that the disciples did not even have to think it over. Jesus asked them to come, and they just went. They did not even finish the job at hand. It's a great story! [image: fishers]

On the other hand, Jesus's call to his disciples seems a bit - well - odd to us. We hear that Jesus called four fishers, but we don't hear anything about them really. What qualifications did they have? Had they been to seminary? Did they tithe? Did they pray regularly? We do not even hear if they were any good at fishing. All that we can tell for sure was that they were willing to leave their boats and nets - which literally represented their jobs, their security, even their sense of identity - in order to follow Jesus with their feet. It is just possible that the fishers left their nets at about the same time that they left their senses. Religion is great, but people still have to eat, right? We have to admit that the story seems a bit odd to us.

And why would Jesus pick fishers? Fishermen were poor, powerless, uneducated. And why in particular would anyone pick James and John. In the gospel of Mark James and John have the nickname, "Sons of Thunder". Would you want them to join your working group? That just cannot be good! Did Jesus really look around and find the best candidates for his mission? Did he have some sort of interview process?

Or did Jesus simply accept the first people who said yes to him. That at least I understand. I'm pretty sure that Marjorie just said yes to the first twit who proposed to her.

And that leads to the biggest question about the disciples. The most obvious and glaring question about the disciples. This applies to the fishers, but actually to all of this disciples. Which is this. Why was it that Jesus's disciples all turn out to be so ... ordinary?

As we continue to read the Gospel of Matthew this year we will discover more stories about the disciples. In Matthew, although even more particularly in Mark, the disciples are frequently depicted as confused by what Jesus was doing and saying. Jesus was always having to explain the meaning of his parables to his disciples. We will get to

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those stories as the year unfolds.

[image: confused cat]

So, Jesus calls the ordinary and the somewhat confused. He calls - what to me seems like a strange collection of people in order to begin his public ministry. His rag-tag collection of ordinary people with the normal limitations of human beings does not seem like the right team to create a world-beating religion. When I think of the disciples I do not think of anything even remotely religious. I think more of Dorothy calling the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion to join her on her quest to see the Wizard of Oz.

[image: fishers]

Now, if you think I have been a bit uncomplimentary to the first disciples, you might be right. But I actually find it quite encouraging. The disciples did not sit around reading theological books. They did not wear fancy clerical robes. They were normal people. People like us. You know, you and me. And if ordinary people - fishers and farmers - were able to join in and participate in the ministry of Jesus - that gives hope for all of us. It certainly gives me hope. Jesus seems to think that common folk - ordinary, diverse people like us - have something to do with the Kingdom of God on earth. That is good news!

But we cannot deny that the fishers were willing to follow their feet. To not only vote with their feet but to leave behind the world they knew in order to follow - on foot - Jesus. To follow Jesus into a new path, into a new faith, into a new reality. The story about the fishers is not just about following Jesus of course. Part of the story is more simply about the fact that the fishers might have wanted to live into a larger life than they imagined they would have if they stayed home and took over the family business. Perhaps the call of Jesus just gave the fishers the final push they needed to leave home and explore.

The fishers left their families, and their family businesses. What do you think Zebedee thought of that? He lost not only his work force, but his heirs. In 5 minutes! And his sons did not go on to become doctors or lawyers. They decided to follow an unemployed person experiencing homeless ... let's be honest ... a bum. They left the

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family business so that they could “fish for men”. Zebedee must have been going out of his mind! But children grow up, and sometimes, that growing up requires moving on to new opportunities. Opportunities that parents simply cannot understand. Children at that time were expected to follow their parents, personally and professionally. But the fishers in our story did neither.

[image: let go]

As some people say, “Sometimes you have to go in order to grow”. Other times, we can grow mentally and emotionally by staying where we already are. But in that case, we still have to let go. In Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth, he speaks to the congregation to encourage growth. Not numerical growth. Paul does not speak about growing a larger church. Instead, he rants on about the need for the congregational members to stop their in-fighting. He tells them to work through their differences. He tells them to abandon their cliques. In short, Paul tells the members of the congregation that they need to grow up.

Have you ever been in a church that was split based on who was baptized by who? It sounds a bit strange. It sounds a bit strange until we realize that the names of the people who had done the baptizing in our story today were not random names. Who were these people: Paul, Apollos, and Cephas? Paul was the original founder of the congregation in Corinth. Apollos was the most recent minister who had been there. And Cephas was one of the original disciples.

So, the bickering that St. Paul refers to may not be so strange after all. I have been in churches where some people identified best with the current minister. Some people identified best with a former minister. And some people identified best with a long-time lay person. What St. Paul is describing is not completely unknown today.

St. Paul’s call to the congregation is nothing less than a call to move on beyond the history that was holding the congregation back. St. Paul was asking the congregation to move forward beyond any past woundings and to embrace their future together. This Paul standing right here is asking this congregation to move forward beyond any past woundings and to embrace our future together.

As the age of Christendom recedes rapidly into the past, we also have to decide

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how - not if - we will move into our own future. We have to decide how to move beyond our history - yes and even beyond our woundings - into that future.

In the words of Julie Craig, “Do we maintain our loyalty to the heritage that brought us here, or do we try to reach out and meet the spiritual needs of a world that is rapidly changing?” And how do we meet those spiritual needs?

[image: leave your emotional baggage]

Perhaps the first step is to make ourselves the best selves we can be. Perhaps like the fishers we need to walk away from something too. What do you need to walk away from to make 2023 a great year for you? Perhaps negativity? Perhaps anger? Perhaps your need to control other people? Perhaps people who take you for granted. Think of whatever it is that is too heavy and perhaps you do not need to carry it at all. I won't ask for a show of hands right now, but I know you all well enough to know that we all - yes, including me - carry baggage that we could choose to walk away from. Baggage that drags us down and makes our lives miserable ... or at least a lot less fun. Baggage that stands between us and a wonderful 2023.

If you don't know where to look for unneeded baggage, ask a friend. They can probably tell you. Or talk to me. You have nothing to lose except something you do not need to carry anyway.

[image: toronto airport]

I find human fascinating. Because we are able to carry so many contradictory ideas at the same time. Think of the last time you flew on an airplane. Did you complain loudly to everyone you met because the airline had the audacity to charge you for “excess baggage”. Of course you did. Nobody wants to pay for excess baggage on a vacation. And yet, most humans are willing to pay huge emotional costs to carry excess baggage every other day of the year. Emotional baggage is expensive. Emotional baggage is much more expensive than the airline fees you complained about the last time you flew. Do you want a better 2023? Really? Start by ditching some baggage.

[image: fishers]

And after we have - personally - ditched some baggage, perhaps we can do the same thing as a congregation.

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You probably expect me to now suggest how we might do that. Well, we will get some great ideas during our closing hymn.

But obvious it involves our soles. We need to be willing to walk. To walk away from unhelpful expectations. To walk towards being and bringing the kingdom of God into our lives. To walk with other people in our midst. To actually walk a mile - or at least a kilometre - in the shoes of the people who live in this community. Many of us take our feet to Victoria Park. But there are many great places to take our feet in Brantford. We need to walk away from what is holding us back. And we need to walk towards wherever our energy takes us. We have to walk into the light.

We need to walk away from the security of who we used to think we were. We need to walk into the mystery of who we will become.

You see - it all comes down to our feet. Sole theology does work.

What will your feet take you this week?

Amen.