

Hespeler, 26 January 2020 © Scott McAndless

Isaiah 9:1-4, Psalm 27:1, 4-9, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4:12-23

**Z**ebedee was getting old. He'd been at this fishing trade for a long time – maybe too long. His hearing wasn't what it once was and that was probably why he didn't hear when the man came walking down the shores of the Sea of Galilee and spoke to his sons who were sitting at the other end of the boat. He didn't even look up from the rather difficult knot that he was struggling to get out of the net.

Besides, he was busy talking – something that he seemed to do all day every day – something that his two sons, James and John, were so accustomed to listening to that they generally responded with nothing but nods and the odd grunt.

“Have you heard about what happened up Capernaum way the other day,” he had been saying to them. “You know Peter and Andrew, the two brothers who have a boat up there? Well, they were out casting their nets just a little off from shore when that new young man – you know, the one that just moved down from the hills in Nazareth – came along. He apparently called out to them across the water and he told them – get this – he told them that they should stop fishing for fish and start fishing for people instead.

“But that's not the really crazy part, oh no! The really crazy part is that they actually listened to him. They jumped off their boat, leaving behind a pretty decent catch of fish in the process, and swam to him and then started following him. Can you believe that?

“They left everything behind. I mean, I realize that there's not a lot of good money in fishing these days. I know better than anybody how hard it is to get by, but these are men who have people depending on them. Peter's got a wife and a couple of kids. Andrew is taking care of his mother and his sisters. I mean, it's just not fair that they should leave those people behind and go off after somebody just because he's got these crazy ideas that maybe mean something to them. It's just not fair that Jesus would even ask them to do something like that.

“Well, at least I know that something like that is not going to happen to me. I know that I can count on my boys to be there for me and to keep this old fishing boat going when I get too old to go out there on the water day after day. You boys know that it wouldn't be fair for you to leave me and... boys? Jimmy, Johnny? You guys are being pretty quiet back there in the stern. You



wouldn't be playing a joke on your old man now would you? Boys, boys?"

Now, obviously I don't know if it went down like that. The Gospel of Matthew tells the story very briefly with little detail. Maybe James and John did have a good talk with their father before they got up and left and the old man was in agreement. But I certainly don't get that impression from reading the gospel story. The point of the story seems to be that they just got up and left. And I can't help but think about what that meant for their father – how he must have thought it was all unfair.

Last fall in the auction, I put a sermon up for the bidding. I said that I would give the person who bid the most the opportunity to tell me what to preach about one Sunday in January: this Sunday. The winner was Andy Cann. And after, I am sure, that Andy flirted with the thought of making me preach something that would probably end my career, he finally suggested to me the title of this morning's sermon: "It ain't fair." Which, frankly, could still end my career if I don't watch out.

Now, Andy was thinking about some particular things that happen in the church when he suggested that topic. He spoke about some of the ways in which the burden of the work of the church tends to fall unfairly on certain people. He spoke, for example, about particular case (that I won't spell out because I don't have permission from everyone involved), but it was a case where a small group of people were supporting an important mission of the church – something that we are all supposed to be part of – mostly out of their own pockets. That, Andy pointed out rightly enough, that ain't right.

I don't really need to get into specific cases in order to explore what Andy was getting at because this is actually something that happens in the church all the time. I don't know how many times over the years I have had somebody come up to me talking about some very similar situation – a situation where somebody feels as if they (or somebody else) are unfairly loaded with some burden, cost or duty in the church. I don't know how many times I have heard people complain that others aren't pitching in and doing their part. And of course, there generally is a lot of truth to what is being said because it is almost never true that the burden of being the church is evenly distributed among all the people.

And part of me wants to use Andy's question to stir people up, to get them to all step up and pitch in – to make sure that we all collectively own and support the good work that the church does. And, of course, that is a noble goal. But I do generally find that, before we ask people to act differently – to share the load differently – we need to ask why it is that people behave the way that they do now. If you don't understand that, chances are you will not be successful at bringing about the changes that you would like to see.

The first question, I think, is whether or not fairness is actually what we should be striving for. The answer to that question might be no. When Jesus

came along and stole Zebedee's two sons away from him, the two sons that he had been depending on to take over the family business, do you think that Jesus was aware of the hardship that he might be causing for the old man? I think that he was. I think that he was aware that, to a certain extent, it was unfair of him to deprive Zebedee of the family supports that he had been counting on.

But why was Jesus there? He was there to proclaim a message, and that message was, Matthew tells us, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**" Jesus was announcing that something so big had arrived that it had changed everything. What's more, he declared that the arrival of the kingdom demanded a particular response: repentance. The word that Jesus uses there – the word that is translated as *repent* – is a Greek word that actually means to change one's mind and one's heart. Jesus was saying that, because God had turned up on the scene to do something grand, that it was time for everyone to start thinking about life and just about everything else in completely different ways. Apparently, that included thinking differently about things like the expectations that society placed upon you.

What James and John did, getting up and walking away from their lives, may have broken all of the expectations that society had placed upon them, but it was actually the perfect response to the new reality that Jesus had brought into being. All of that is a way of saying that our human notions of fairness, that idea that everyone else should live up to the expectations we have of them, may have been superseded by something greater, something more important, by the kingdom of heaven which blasts everyone's expectations out of the water – apparently literally in the case of Peter and Andrew.

Now, does that mean that there should be no expectation of fairness in the life of the church? Of course not. But it does mean that we are supposed to look at the bigger picture and not just the fairness of a particular circumstance.

I've always been a bit puzzled by our reading this morning from Paul's letter to the Galatians. Addressing the church, he says, "**Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.**" But then, only a couple of lines later he says, "**for all must carry their own loads.**" Now just wait a minute here, Paul, which is it? Do we carry other people's burdens or just our own? Surely you cannot have it both ways.

But, of course, Paul knew exactly what he was doing when he put those two contradictory sentences so close together. He was trying to get our attention. He was actually trying to show us that, when we focus on what other people are doing or contributing, we will go astray. That is why, in between those two contradictory statements, he slips in this little gem: "**All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbour's work, will become a cause for pride.**"

You see, if we only focus on what other people are doing (or failing to do), the church can never become what it needs to be. Focussing on what other people do, Paul warns us, is the cause of pride. Pride is a difficult concept for us to understand sometimes. Pride can sometimes be a good thing like, for example, when someone takes pride in doing a job well. When you set out to do something and you put everything you can into it and get the results you are trying for, of course you should be able to feel good about what you have accomplished.

Paul is not here warning about that kind of pride because it is a pride that that is related to testing your *own* work, focussing on what you can do. The problem comes when you try to feel good about yourself by focussing on other people – by putting someone else down so that you look better or by criticizing somebody else’s best efforts. That, Paul is saying, is what is very destructive for the church and in many other areas of life. And I will say that, yes, that is something that I have seen often enough in the life of the church.

Sometimes, for example, the very people who carry the heavy loads at the church, and occasionally righteously complain about it, are trapped precisely because they have this problem. They might well say, for example, that they want somebody else to take on their burden, but what happens when somebody actually steps up to do so? Well, they don’t do it right, do they? They don’t do it in the way that it has always been done, so they can’t take over. And so the person who tries to take on their burden gives up in frustration and they end up still carrying that burden *and* (even better) still being able to complain about how unfair it is. That is all about a dangerous kind of pride, all about feeling better about yourself by criticizing others and it has no place in the logic of the kingdom of heaven.

Paul suggests that the only way for you to avoid this kind of pitfall is to focus on what you can do, how you can contribute by bearing the burdens of others rather than on who ought to be bearing your burdens and who ought to be doing what and how and so falling into the pride that puts others down. The result of all of that is not always going to be fair in the sense that the burdens will always be equally distributed. But the kingdom was always about more than what feels fair in the moment, it is about changing the way that we look at everything because God has suddenly shown up on the scene.

I feel for poor Zebedee left alone in his boat. The aftermath of all of that cannot have been easy for him. But he also had his role to play and a burden to bear in the great thing that God was doing. I have to believe that he came to realize that, even if it took some time. We all have our roles to play and our burdens to carry. As we all focus on what we can do to carry the loads of others, we will come to find the true strength of the message that Jesus brought.