

Sermon: Bridges to Burn, Bridges to Cross
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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BRIDGES TO BURN, BRIDGES TO CROSS

There are bridges that we must burn, and there are bridges that we must cross. The difficulty is in knowing which is which.

Today's lesson from Matthew is all about bridge burning and bridge crossing. If we are to follow Jesus, the Gospel tells us that some bridges had to be burnt and some bridges had to be crossed.

BURNING THE BRIDGE OF SELF-INTEREST

Let's look first at the bridges that are burnt in today's lesson. The first verse alludes to a very significant bridge burning. The ministry of Jesus had to replace the ministry of John the Baptist.

The ministry of Jesus begins just as the ministry of John the Baptist is winding down. The Scripture tells us that when Jesus got word that John had been arrested, he returned to Galilee. The end of one ministry triggers the beginning of another.

Apparently John the Baptist was quite a leader in his own right. The Jewish historian, Josephus, refers to his ministry approvingly and at one time John had quite a following. The Bible tells us that great crowds followed John into the desert to be baptized.

But, now John is in prison because he dared to challenge the immoral ways of King Herod, and this provides the opportunity for Jesus to begin his ministry in Galilee.

John himself foresaw the day when his ministry would end. Indeed, he always pointed away from himself to the "Lamb of God" who would take away the sins of the world. John said that he was preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah, but John insisted that he was not the Messiah. John said that he must decrease so that Jesus could increase.

If the kingdom of God is to come into our life, we must first burn the bridge of self-interest. We must recognize that our job is always to point away from ourselves and toward Jesus. We must decrease so that he can increase.

This is a hard bridge for many of us religious leaders to burn. The religious world is filled with larger than life characters that develop elaborate "ministries." But, sometimes these programs seem to be more about the leader than Jesus.

There are many churches in our Presbytery that struggle because they haven't been able to burn their bridges with a former pastor. In fact we now know that when a minister has a long and successful stay at a church, the next minister is in for a rough time and possibly a short stay.

Why is that so? We have a hard time replacing our own ministries with the ministry of Jesus. We become so enamored with the messenger that we forget about the message.

When the time comes for me to leave this church, I hope you remember me kindly but not too kindly. If there is one thing that I deeply believe, it is this. We are called to point to Jesus and no one else. We have to leave behind the leaders and the ministries of the past in order to embrace what Jesus is calling us to do today and in the future.

BURNING THE BRIDGE TO HOME

That brings us to a second bridge that is burned in our lesson for today, the bridge that leads to home. The Scripture tells us that Jesus moved from his hometown, Nazareth to the lakeside village of Capernaum.

This move was made so that the prophecy might be fulfilled. Isaiah said that the Messiah would live in this part of the world and would bring light to a people who had suffered in darkness for many years. (Isaiah 9:1-2)

Jesus always felt that doing the will of his Heavenly Father meant that he had to leave home. The one story we have about Jesus' childhood years is about the time he became separated from his parents because he was teaching in the temple in Jerusalem. When his parents frantically came back to find him, he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, taking care of my Father's business?" (Luke 2:49)

In order to do His Father's business Jesus had to leave the comfort of his hometown for a new place. Not only was Jesus willing to do this but he also required his disciples to do it as well. Did you notice the bridges the disciples were called to burn in response to the call of Jesus? They had to leave home as well.

Jesus told these fishermen, "Come, and follow me." And they followed. They didn't ask questions. They didn't say, "Where are we going?" They just followed.

Many stories of faith begin with a change in location. In the Old Testament Abraham pulled up stakes in his old age and wandered around in the wilderness at the call of God. And almost every story of faith in the Bible since Abraham seems to begin with this same call to move, to trust God with the uncertainties of life.

RESIDENT ALIENS

Moving, of course, is not just about changing location. It is about more than that. It's about being willing to leave our comfort zone. It is about a willingness to take a risk for the kingdom. It is about being willing to step out in faith when God calls.

There's always something unsettling about the call of God. Some of us are nest builders. We like to be near family and friends in a part of the world that is familiar to us.

And that's why we're so disturbed when our part of the world begins to change. I'm as guilty as anyone when it comes to this. I complain about all the growth in our area, about the clogged roads and overdeveloped land. Even though I've only been here ten years, the place doesn't feel like home any more. I can only imagine how the people who have been here many years feel.

Thomas Wolfe wrote a novel entitled, "You Can't Go Home Again." But, I would suggest that even if you stay home, it will some day change to the point that you won't be able to recognize it.

As followers of Christ this shouldn't be an issue for us to worry about. We can't allow ourselves to get too comfortable with who we are and where we are because to follow Christ means to constantly be on a journey. This place we call home, no matter where it might be, is not our final destination.

A popular theologian referred to those who dare to follow Christ as "resident aliens." That is, no matter where we live or what we are doing, it is not our home or permanent job. Just as God's

people could not be happy and settled when the Babylonians took them into captivity, so we cannot entirely settle in our world either.

Henri Nouwen once wrote, "He who thinks he is finished is finished Those who think they have arrived, have lost their way. Those who have reached their goal, have missed it. Those who think they are saints, are demons."

There should be a kind of holy restlessness to our existence because we know that God in Christ is always calling us to a greater home and a higher purpose. There is always the possibility that one fine day as we do our daily chores Christ will come our way and say "follow me," and that will be that. We will go where he leads.

BURNING THE BRIDGE TO OUR JOB

That's what happened to the disciples. When Jesus came calling that day, they left not only their home but also their jobs. The call of Jesus required them to burn bridges when it came to their way of making a living.

This happens twice in our Scripture for today.

Peter and his brother Andrew are casting their nets into the sea. Jesus calls them, and "immediately" they leave their nets and follow Jesus. The same thing happens with James and John. They're in the boat mending their nets with their father, Zebedee. Jesus calls and "immediately" they drop their nets and follow Jesus, leaving poor Zebedee all alone.

This attachment to our job is one of the most difficult bridges to burn if God calls us to do it. Many of us cling to our job as a life preserver in the uncertain sea of life.

Certainly, we are grateful for meaningful work to do and the opportunity to provide for our families. But, if Christ is truly our Master, then work cannot be the most important thing in our life. We may be engaged in work, but never married to it.

And whenever we are pressed or tempted to make work supreme, we are to recall the story of the four fishermen. We are to remember how they left their nets and their boats to go and be with Jesus, to do what he would have them do.

There is more to life than what we do for a living. In fact, sometimes a job can become a stone that makes us sink instead of a life preserver that keeps us afloat.

Jesus wants to give us more than a job. Jesus wants to give us a vocation. A vocation is a job with a higher purpose. A vocation is a calling to do something that has eternal implications.

For the young people here who may be struggling with what to do with their lives, I would suggest that you don't need a job. You need a vocation.

You need to do what God is calling you to do. You need to find that place where your joy meets the world's deep need and then pursue that dream with all your might.

BRIDGE BURNING AND BRIDGE CROSSING

Now there are some people who are great at burning bridges but not crossing them. You may be one of them. These people are always leaving family and friends and job for some great dream or scheme in another place.

But, they don't do that in response to God's call.

They do it in response to their own changing needs and ideas.

They become wanderers who always feel a bit unsettled and unhappy.

God never calls us to burn bridges in this way.

God calls us to burn some bridges so that we can cross other bridges.
God calls us to give up some things so that we gain something even greater.

Once the disciples were talking to Jesus about all that they had given up to follow him. Peter said on behalf of the whole group, "We left everything and followed you. What do we get out of it?" (Matthew 19:27, Msg.)

Jesus replied that everything they had given up to follow him would be replaced a hundred times over. Bridge burning would give way to bridge crossing.

If they had given up family, they would gain a new and larger family of faith. If they had given up their job, they would be given a new and more meaningful vocation.

FISHERS OF MEN AND WOMEN

So what were the disciples to do now that they would no longer be fisherman? Jesus said that they would become "fishers of men" (and women). This new vocation would be the bridge that they would cross. It would be the path that would take them farther and farther toward the kingdom of God.

So, what did that mean, to be fishers of men and women? It meant that instead of filling their lives with long hours in the night struggling to drag fish ashore in their nets, now they would spend their time bringing men and women into the kingdom of God, inviting them to follow Jesus as they themselves had been invited before.

And it was that activity which eventually brought them a new and expanded vision of family and faith. The Christian community formed by this new kind of "fishing" was like a huge bridge that opened up a whole new world of opportunity and love.

When they learned to fish for people, they gained much more than they lost. They crossed many more bridges than they burned.

NET FISHING

One commentator made an important point about this passage. When Jesus told the disciples that he would make them fishers of men, he wasn't thinking about the old put the lure on the hook and reel in the bass trick that some of us like to practice.

The fishing that Jesus was talking about was the net fishing that commercial fisherman do. In Jesus' day, they had just learned how to preserve fish with the use of salt. People loved it. So the Sea of Galilee was heavily fished by commercial fisherman. The disciples were commercial fishermen who caught fish with a net.

Have you ever seen commercial fishermen bringing in their nets?
Their nets are filled with fish, every kind of fish.

This is the image that the early church used to describe evangelism. It was not a situation where a hook was baited and people were "tricked" into making a profession of faith.

It was a situation in which a great net called the gospel was thrown out into the world and everyone who would come, everyone who believed in the name of Jesus was included in the catch.

I conceive of evangelism as a way to embrace the entire world with the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Some of us remember those old Coca Cola commercials when the

world's children were gathered on a hilltop singing, "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony."

That's my vision of evangelism, a world of harmony. But, I wouldn't be the one teaching them to sing. No, this choir would be taught by Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. It would be a song of forgiveness and hope that could change even the worst situations.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

But, this great vision of the world begins with personal decisions to follow Christ and His way of peace and love and justice.

So now I make the questions personal. What bridges do you need to burn and what bridges do you need to cross in order to follow Jesus?

Jesus doesn't ask everyone to leave everything behind, but Jesus does ask everyone to leave something behind? What do we need to leave behind in your life in order to follow Jesus?

What bridges do we need to burn?

Regrets about the past? Anger at some person? A family that dominates too much of our time and effort? A job that is draining our life away instead of giving our life meaning?

And what bridges do we need to cross?

Do we need to move to a different place, either literally or figuratively? Perhaps we need to take up a new vocation, or perhaps we need to make the job we have into a vocation. Maybe we need a new way of looking at life and the way we use the resources that God has given us.

All of us probably need a new way of looking at the people in our community.

Instead of seeing this vast influx of people into our area as a nuisance that is ruining "our way of life", maybe we need to see these newcomers as people whom God loves.

Maybe we need to see their arrival as an opportunity to preach the gospel of forgiveness and hope, an opportunity to bring light to a land that has been darkened by the shadow of the almighty dollar and a false god called "entertainment".

The call of Jesus can come to us in many ways. But, one thing is sure. The call will require us to change in some significant way. What is Jesus calling you to do this day? Where is Jesus calling you to go?

You never know when it is time to drop what you're doing and go fishing with Jesus.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN