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When my son was young, he wanted an aquarium, so we purchased a tank, water pump, water heater, and small gravel for the bottom of the aquarium. We bought a cute pirate's chest filled with treasure and some plastic plants. We added the water and balanced the chemicals. When the aquarium water was ready, we purchased some fish food and fish—guppies, tetras, angel fish. We bought what are called community fish, for aggressive fish would attack the other fish and we wanted to avoid them.

Maintaining an aquarium takes work: clean the gravel in the bottom with a suction hose, add fresh water to avoid toxic water, and of course, feed the fish. Those fish could not move beyond the glass walls of the aquarium, spending their years swimming around inside. I'm not sure they even knew that something existed beyond those waters. Many years later, when the pump developed a leak and the water ran onto the floor, that brought an end to the small community of fish.

Through the years, I've been in congregations that felt like an aquarium—people gathered together striving to maintain the water inside, not noticing anything beyond the walls of the building. Bickering

inside the walls became toxic, and those who visited didn't return. Without the flow of new ideas into the congregation, the waters became stagnate. It sometimes felt as though energy was seeping out of the building.

When Jesus encountered some fishermen along the Sea of Galilee, he had a vision that went way beyond the glass walls of their lives. Rather than catching fish with their nets, Jesus suggested they become fishers of people, but not for the purpose of catching them for an aquarium, but for something way beyond narrow glass boundaries.

Before Matthew's story of Jesus' invitation to the fisherman, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptizer, as a sign of both God's blessing and Jesus' connection to all of us who enter those holy waters. John invited followers to turn their lives around, to leave behind those things that distract us from following God. When Jesus entered those waters, he experienced the blessing of God and the struggles of humanity.

Not soon after exiting the waters, Jesus entered the desert where he experienced forty days of temptation, once again, connecting to the struggles that we face in our lives. How many of us have felt the

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temptations of greed and power, desiring the ability to control others and get our own way?

And then we come to today's reading. Did you sense the feelings of loss hidden within the text? Jesus heard that John had been arrested. In response, Jesus withdrew, away from the crowds of people, seeking a moment of rest to mourn that his cousin, the one who baptized him, was now in captivity.

In the midst of this loss, Matthew recalled what the prophet Isaiah had spoken generations before. The words seemed to offer a spark of hope:

the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.

In order to shine that light into the gloomy shadows of life, Jesus needed others to help him, for he couldn't transform the world alone. Matthew doesn't spend much time explaining whether Jesus knew Peter and Andrew before inviting them to follow him, but in the novel *The Book of Longings* by Sue Monk Kidd, she imagines Jesus getting to know Peter and Andrew and others who were baptized by John the Baptizer. These followers longed for a better world rather than one ruled by corrupt leaders. When John

was captured, Jesus emerged as the new leader, and he began speaking with others who had also been inspired by John.

First, Jesus invited Peter and Andrew to join him in fishing for people, as then James and John. In order to follow this invitation, they had to drop their fishnets to begin this journey.

I imagine the conversation that might have occurred:

"We agree with your ideas, Jesus, for we all like what John had to say, but where do you want us to go?"

"You will see," Jesus may have replied.

"How about we take our nets, for we could continue catching fish for our food?"

With a twinkle in his eye, Jesus might have replied, "God will provide."

One disciple might have jokingly said, "Well, maybe we could use our nets to catch fish for aquariums. You know, so people can enjoy watching little fish swim inside a tank."

"Drop it. You won't need those nets."

"But that's all I know. How can I drop my nets and leave them behind?"

"Drop it, and discover what God has in mind."

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When God invites us to drop it, to leave our safety nets behind, to stop being an aquarium, to look beyond the glass walls of our lives, we become followers of Jesus. I think that's something our congregations are continuing to learn as we discern the needs of Elkhart and St. Joseph counties and fill the barrel in our fellowship hall with needed items—things that can bring relief to those struggling. It may seem like a small step to purchase gloves or toothbrushes or cans of food, but offering God's light to the world begins with a small step, as in a parable told by writers Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo.

A boring, little town...decided to hold a footrace. On the appointed day, the runners showed up in all their athletic finery. The crowds gathered. But then, something very strange happened:

"The runners took a step or two or three across the starting line, and then abruptly stopped. One man fell to his knees, crying, 'I have crossed the starting line! This is the happiest day of my life!' ...

"Another woman started jumping for joy. 'Yes!' she shouted, raising her fist in the air. 'I am a race-runner! I am finally a race-runner!' She ran

around jumping and dancing, getting and giving high-fives to others who shared her joy at being in the race.

"Several people formed a circle and prayed, quietly thanking God for the privilege of crossing the starting line, and thanking God that they were not like the skeptics who didn't come dressed for the race."

The spectators, the authors say, were baffled by this strange behavior, but finally one observer turned to a neighbor and suggested that maybe they ought to get into the race. And so they did. Many others joined them:

"Soon many were kicking off their dress shoes, slipping out of their jackets, throwing all this unneeded clothing on the grass. And they ran — past the praying huddles and past the crying individuals and past the jumping high-fivers. And they found hope and joy in every step, and they grew stronger with every mile and hill. To their surprise, the path never ended — because in this race, there was no finish line. So they were never bored again."¹

You're invited to the race, to bring light to the world, so drop it—whatever distracts you—and follow the one who invites us to drop our nets and fish for people.

¹ Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel* (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2006) from HomileticsOnline, 1/27/08.