

“Holy Hustlers”

Good morning, it's wonderful to be with you all today! Thank you so much to Rev. Lex and Rev. Sarah for letting me share this pulpit. My name is Aaron Scott. I work at Chaplains on the Harbor—a mission station of this diocese located out on the coast, in rural Grays Harbor County. We are a parish of around 500 poor, homeless, and incarcerated people based in one of the poorest counties in the state, so the way we do church is rooted in collective survival. We run six feeding programs a week, host a cold weather shelter, distribute Narcan (the opioid overdose reversal drug), do street outreach, make weekly jail visits, publish a jail and prison newsletter, offer supportive employment for people getting off the street and out of jail, operate a four acre farm, run a community center, do weekly worship, popular education, and human rights organizing. Last year we settled two federal lawsuits against the City of Aberdeen for violating the human and constitutional rights of homeless people. In our work with the Poor People's Campaign, we've been honored to walk alongside incredible leaders as they've made the journey from homelessness, incarceration, and addiction to directly addressing and sharing their truths before the highest levels of governance in this country. We have eleven people on our staff right now, eight of whom are formerly homeless. They have testified before US Senators, attended hearings of the House Budget Committee, and interrogated presidential candidates on the failure of this richest nation in the history of the world to end poverty.

Some people think we are an exciting and new kind of church. We are not. There is nothing older in the Christian tradition than a bunch of poor people taking care of each other while causing a ruckus and speaking truth to power. Case in point, today's Gospel reading:

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

“Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

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This story is the dream of every organizer who's ever called for a wildcat strike. How bad of a gig must this have been, that Peter, Andrew, James and John were so ready at a moment's notice to walk off?

We can guess pretty easily that fishing in the ancient Mediterranean was neither the safest nor most comfortable job. History attests to this. Fish was a staple food across the ancient Roman Empire, [consumed by all classes](#), and fishing was a major industry. You had the people who caught it, the people who built the boats, the people who sold licenses and collected taxes on it, [the police who cracked down on illegal fishing](#), the fish processing facilities, the merchants who shipped it. All of this was taking place, of course, in a society where the vast majority of people were living in poverty and barely surviving day to day. There is no middle class in Jesus' historical moment. There are the elites and then there is everyone else—not so unlike today.

Fishers are in that “everyone else” group. [Slave fishermen were numerous](#). While fishing was recreation for the elites, romantically depicted in their ancient art, the everyday people who actually fed the empire through their labor and risk “[remain almost invisible](#)” (at least outside of the Gospels).

The Bible remains some of the most enduringly positive media we have about poor people. Where else do we consistently, repetitively hear the message that poor people doing the dirtiest, most dangerous, most undervalued work are chosen by God as leaders in this world? Where else do we hear the message that poor people are allowed—or even called by God!—to walk off their dirty, dangerous, undervalued jobs in order to help God change the world? We don't hear that on the news. We don't read it in the newspapers. Liberal and conservative pundits and bloggers alike generally fail to see poor people as moral leaders and true authorities on how best to transform this unjust society. Thank God for the Gospel for holding out this truth for us.

I serve on the National Steering Committee for the [Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival](#). As part of the campaign's activities two summers ago, nine interfaith religious leaders were arrested on the steps of the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C.—essentially for praying, and for refusing to disperse as they prayed. They were held overnight in jail. After they were released two of my friends, The Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis and Shailly Gupta-Barnes, shared with me that they'd spent a long time talking with other inmates while they were being held on the women's side of the jail. All the inmates were poor women. As Shailly and Liz and the other protestors talked about the Poor People's Campaign, sharing how they'd risked arrest to bring attention to the staggering rates of poverty in this wealthy nation, the women began to tell their own stories of surviving poverty and fighting against it.

One of them was suffering from domestic abuse and in jail because she fought back. One of them was late to work and arrested for running a stop light. One of them was a fast food worker, named Baby. She didn't stick to the limits that her employer put on how much food went to each order. She knew people were coming in who couldn't afford what they needed and she piled on extra meatballs and toppings to their orders. No one would go hungry on her watch because they couldn't afford to eat. Rev. Theoharis said, “Baby told us we should come into her restaurant and have other Poor People's Campaign folks come in to get free or reduced priced meals so we could continue the fight—so she was for helping random poor people as well as supporting the cause of the poor organizing for justice.”

If you're not convinced that petty theft from a giant multinational corporation—for the sake of feeding and organizing the poor—is God's work, let me read you [something about the Bible days](#):

In general, the economy of the Roman Empire [a giant multinational power!] was extractive insofar as production and distribution served the interests of the powerful, not those who actually performed the labor. Peasant fishers and processors had little to no control over fees for fishing licenses or tax and toll rates. It is reasonable to conclude that such an economic situation was largely one of exploitation. This exploitation may have intensified in the Galilee during Herod Antipas's reign, due largely to his increased commercialization of fishing and his own luxurious living. At any rate, fishers, farmers and other laborers in the Galilee sought ways to resist exploitation by hiding goods, lying about the size of their families in order to pay fewer poll taxes, and other covert strategies. Knowledge of the Galilean fishing economy raises interesting questions about the various "fish traditions" throughout the gospels. What are we to make of the catch of 153 large fish, for example, that, instead of being shipped off to those who could afford them, are eaten for breakfast by Jesus' disciples (John 21:1-14)? Might this story have a subversive quality that has otherwise gone unnoticed?

What kind of leaders is God calling right now, to spearhead the salvation of this broken and beautiful world? Those living comfortably at the top, or those risking their very lives and livelihoods to do the right thing—to feed God's people, to keep one another alive when the powers and principalities turn their backs on the poor? This world has more than enough for all of us to thrive, but when we run off the rails, God is always *always* choosing folks from the bottom to get us back on track. Why? Because people at the bottom are the ones who know up close and personal how profoundly things need to change. That's why Jesus called these four. That's who Jesus is inviting us to hear today, too: leaders from the bottom. Fast food workers. Prisoners. Homeless people. The Gospel is for all of us—God's dream is for all of us—but to bridge the gap between this burning world and "earth as it is in heaven," is going to require us to search out a very particular kind of leadership. It's the kind of leadership that knows how to make a way out of no way.

It's the kind of leadership the Poor People's Campaign encountered in that cell at night in the D.C. city jail: devoted to human kindness and uplifting the hungry even when doing so breaks the law. At Chaplains on the Harbor we call these kinds of leaders "holy hustlers" and we are powerfully enriched by their spiritual gifts.

It's the kind of leadership we see every single day on the streets of Grays Harbor County: speaking out and speaking up about what all God's children deserve, even when you have been stigmatized as "unclean" and "undeserving" because of your criminal record or your track marks.

It's the kind of leadership that responds to the call of God in real time: dropping the nets to the floor of the boat and walking away from exploitation and toward redemption of the whole world—no matter the risk.

<https://aaronheartsjesus.wordpress.com/2020/01/20/sermon-third-sunday-after-epiphany-2020/>

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