

In this morning's gospel lesson we hear Jesus' call to discipleship hot on the heels of Jesus' call to repentance. Both of these call stories are located right before the Sermon on the Mount, which is Jesus' longest sustained reflection on how disciples are to *be* in the world. The New Testament scholar, Ulrich Luz calls these stories the "entry gate" to the Sermon on the Mount. Next week we are going to begin spending some time in the Sermon on the Mount – and so before we hear Jesus' sermon, we've got to pay attention to the prerequisites. Repentance and obedience are the prior condition necessary to living Jesus' call to discipleship – and having heard John's call to repentance a couple of weeks ago in Advent, this morning we're going to look at the second of these call stories which stresses the single-minded obedience of the disciples.

Let us hear the word of the Lord from Matthew Chapter Four, verses 12-23.

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— 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.' From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

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 lake—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.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

This is the Word of the Lord.

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What makes these ordinary fishermen disciples? We might speculate that it was something Jesus *saw* in Simon, Andrew, James and John? – some potential or sincerity, or gentleness of spirit that made them ideal candidates? The text is silent on that. In fact all four gospels say nary a word about Jesus' thought process on the matter. We can speculate, but Matthew shows us that we're off to a false start if our attention is directed anywhere other than toward the Word of Jesus. Jesus says, "follow me" and they drop everything. And so rather than making a case for why these guys would have been the logical choice,

Matthew turns us toward the question: what was it about *Jesus* that elicited such a sudden and surprising response?

It might be helpful if we knew a few things about the rabbi-student relationship. “Follow me” was an invitation to apprenticeship, to join one’s life; subordinate one’s own identity to that of the teacher. It is a costly endeavor and not something that one enters into lightly. Ordinarily, it was the student who came asking for the privilege of studying, working, and living with a rabbi.

The odd thing about Jesus is that he recruits. Not only that, but he does so miles away from the epicenter of all that is bright and elite – the brightest and the best were already disciples of other rabbis. Tom Adair joked as we looked at this passage in youth group last week, that Jesus makes the unordinary move of assembling the “B-Team.” The second-string goes out to spread the message of the Kingdom, and Jesus promises to shape them into a team along the way.

Jesus is no ordinary rabbi; he is Lord. No one comes to the Lord by one’s own initiative; the Lord comes to them first.

When Jesus calls this band of brothers, they are working and yet in both instances they immediately leave their nets to follow. Bonhoeffer writes, “The disciple’s answer is not a spoken confession of faith in Jesus. Instead it is the obedient deed”¹. Paul tells us that the gospel is “foolishness to the Greeks” and scenes like this one give us a pretty good indication of why that is the case. We are impelled by reason to reject the abruptness of these men’s response. James and John leave their father, their boats, their nets – their inheritance, their possessions and their livelihood, why?

We want to know why these men were so anxious that they could drop everything and follow. We need a little more in the way of explanation – some sort of mediation, and editorial not, maybe a back-story or a deep psychological insight somewhere in the narrative. Tell us that Zebedee was a tyrant – that his sons wanted to be dentists and they faced exile on the island of misfit toys if they didn’t shape up and learn to fish. The whole episode begs the question, why?

Because it’s Jesus. The obedience of the disciples rests entirely on the authority of the one who calls. Nothing comes before, and nothing comes after except the obedience of the one called. Jesus is calling them not as a teacher or as a role model, but as the Christ: very God of very God. This is Matthew’s way of turning our heads toward the one who is doing the calling and toward his authority to issue the call. And for Matthew there’s really no other path to faith other than Jesus’ call.

There’s really not a lot said about what discipleship entails. “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men” certainly lacks description. The emphasis is on “follow me”. Jesus clearly isn’t introducing his disciples to a church growth program or to an ideal – he is calling them to himself. “Follow me” is a continuous walk with him – live life *with me*. And we know that that call was also to be their highest priority. It resulted in some significant sacrifices. They

¹ Discipleship, p. 57

were being asked to leave behind anything that would stand between themselves and the call.

In college, shortly after I began worshiping at a small Presbyterian Church, a seminary-bound friend of mine gave me a copy of the *Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer is required reading for anyone who preaches here at Tuckahoe. For a twenty-year old who was just beginning to search for a faith that matters, his description of discipleship was at once compelling and daunting. He writes:

Discipleship is commitment to Christ. Because Christ exists, he must *be followed*. An idea about Christ, a doctrinal system, a general religious recognition of grace or forgiveness of sins does not require discipleship. In truth, it even excludes discipleship; it is inimical to it. One enters into relation with an idea by way of knowledge, enthusiasm, perhaps even by carrying it out, but never by personal obedient discipleship. Christianity without the living Jesus Christ remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship; and a Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without Jesus Christ. It is an idea, a myth...Discipleship without Jesus Christ is choosing one's own path.²

To be a disciple means to follow the living Jesus without reservation - not a set of abstract religious doctrines (sound though they may be). And when the disciples do this, ministry happens.

There is a deep challenge in this call to discipleship, but there's also a deep hope embedded in the call. The disciples are not called to follow Jesus because they've got it all together - and that means neither are we. The in-breaking of God's kingdom is not up to us. It rests solely on the calling Word of Jesus. This means that you don't have to have all the answers. If God calls, God will equip. Our task is merely to be obedient to the call and to trust.

Often when God is calling us to do something through the voice of the church, we carry around these nagging voices in our heads that tell us we are not the right person. We encounter this every time the nominating committee gets set to find elders or deacons or when the Christian Formation division searches for Sunday school teachers. God surely can't use one such as me. Matthew's gospel is here to remind us that it's not about how good or useful we are - it's about the power and the authority of the one who issues forth the call.

I learned something important along those lines six Januarys ago in Northern Ireland. As I'm sure you know, that country has been embroiled in sectarian animosity for centuries, and has been subject to outbreaks of violence from time to time when the tension between factions gets overheated. In recent years as Catholic and Protestant groups have been working toward rapprochement, some of the Protestant groups have, in addition to their continued abuse of Catholics, been particularly ruthless in their denunciation of moderate Protestants. Most of the time it was a wonderful place to live. Some of the time people would light cars on fire and spray paint your wall.

² Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* p. 59 (Italic mine).

When one of our members - Samuel Reid - passed away at the age of 97 half of his family were Presbyterians, the other half were Free Presbyterians. His daughter (who is a member of the Free Presbyterian Church) did everything in her power to block our access to her father while he was in the hospital because she believed that Presbyterians were not saved. Roger, my senior minister colleague, was only able to make to a member of his own congregation because Sam's son was Presbyterian and made contact with us against his sister's wishes. Religious identification can be a bit tricky in Belfast hospitals.

On the evening of Sam's death, Roger decided that I should be the one to visit the family to counsel and make funeral arrangements. Already it was clear that the situation would be tense: there were deep, deep wounds in this family that I couldn't even begin to understand. Before I arrived the daughter and son had gotten into a fight over the fact that she had already contacted her minister and was planning to have the funeral in her church and her father buried away from the family plot. As I sat in my car before entering the home, I prayed. When I opened the door I had absolutely no idea what to do or say. Roger was in Scotland and I'd never planned a funeral before. It might be a better end to the sermon if I were able to tell you that I witnessed the healing presence of the Holy Spirit end decades of familial strife.

That's not what happened. It was awful – a colossal failure. There were tears, accusations, yelling - I was undermined in every possible way by half of the family who saw my presence as a threat and an insult. I was as patient, understanding, and tactful as I could be and everything was going wrong. I remember feeling divided – I wanted so badly to comfort and bear witness to Christ, but at the same time I realized that despite my best intentions, there was nothing I could do to bring this family together and it was very possible that my presence was making things worse. I took down the details for the funeral arrangements, said a prayer, and excused myself feeling utterly useless.

When the funeral came a few days later the two families simply didn't speak to each other. Later at the graveside service, as Roger was performing the burial rites, I looked up to see the two families standing on opposite sides of their father's grave. Not even in death could a brother and sister learn to see the image of God in the other.

I was certain that I had no idea what I was doing, but in the midst of that experience there grew an equally powerful certainty that the kingdom of God does not hang in the balance of my best efforts or failures. In the end, the world and all that's in it belong to God, and *God will prevail*.

We often think ourselves unworthy to answer the call. The gospel tells us a different story. Throughout his story Matthew is unsparing in his description of the disciples' incomprehension. It seems that they get it wrong a little more often than they get it right. But they do follow Jesus. And we can too – because it's not about how smart or eloquent or graceful we are. Not because of what we can or can not do – but because of who Jesus is. The only way to discover that is to get out of the boat and follow.

Thanks be to God.