

“Christ’s Call”

Matthew 4: 18-22

January 31, 2021

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie Osterhoudt

Today’s scripture reading is about Christ’s call to discipleship. All four of the gospels describe Jesus’ call to the first folks to be called as his disciples. When Christ calls, how do they – and you and I today – respond? It’s not always so simple to drop everything, leave your home and family, turn your life around, and follow where God leads us. We offer up our excuses as to why we cannot follow or why something cannot be done in the church. The most creative excuse I received from a parishioner many years ago, after calling and inviting them to a particular ministry of the church which I didn’t think was exceptionally demanding, was that they had just gotten a new puppy and just couldn’t serve at that time. Acknowledging our excuses and reluctance to follow, let’s listen now to this morning’s gospel story – from Matthew.

Prayer for Understanding: Speak to us your word, Holy God, that we may hear Jesus’ call to be his disciples. Cut through our evasions, justification, excuses and broaden our vision of who you call us to be and how you would have us to serve. Help us strengthen our trust in Jesus Christ so that we might lay down our preconceived agendas in order to follow where he leads us. Amen.

Read Matthew 4:18-22

Wow!! Immediately, the Fav Four, as we called them in seminary, Peter, brother Andrew, brothers James and John, dropped what they were doing and followed Jesus. Jesus only uttered two words – no pleading, convincing, bargaining – just “Follow me.” Jesus did offer up a bit of an explanation as to why he called these 4 men, drawing upon their experience and skill sets – “I will make you fish for people.” Jesus recognized they had a skill set, experience, that he would need in his future ministry. Perhaps this is a hint for how we go about asking folks to serve in today’s church. Instead of just needing warm bodies to fill slots of our creation, maybe we need to take the time to get to know folks, their passions, their experience, their skills and then consider how they might best use who they are and what they have for the furtherance of God’s kingdom in our midst. It really isn’t about recruitment – that’s a secular term. It is about inviting people to join us and Jesus Christ in ministry.

There’s another question I have been pondering and I confess I do not have any answers, nor I have I discovered any suggestions in biblical scholarship. Why did Jesus select two sets of brothers to follow him? I hope you will ponder this question with me and I would truly be interested in your thoughts! Was it because it was important to signal to Jesus’ disciples that we are never asked/invited by Jesus to serve alone?

Discipleship is a partnership not a solo act – it is a team effort.

Biblical scholars suggest that Peter and Andrew were probably the poorer of the siblings – having no boats to leave, only nets. For James and John, following Jesus was probably a little more complicated – complicated because their business was more prosperous and their assets were greater – apparently, they owned boats- and they had to leave their father to run the business without them.

“Immediately.” Matthew indicates that there is urgency to the gospel message. No sitting around trying to debate theological details, no researching historical documents, no predicting the consequences, no calculating our response. It’s simple: Jesus says “Follow me.” And we have to decide right here, right now, whether we will.

Why did Peter, Andrew, James and John make the decision to immediately change directions in their lives?

Lamar Williamson, professor of biblical studies at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, VA, in his commentary on Mark’s gospel, says of this passage:

“A modern analogy may capture some (not all) dimensions of this summary of Jesus’ preaching. In a crowded airline terminal, hundreds of persons are scurrying in dozens of directions. Above the steady buzz of noise a voice booms through a loud-speaker, “Flight 362 is now arriving at gate 23. Will passengers holding tickets for New York please check in at gate 23; you will be boarding soon.” Some people, of course, never hear the announcements and continue on their way. Others hear it but, having reservations on another flight, pay no attention. Some, however, who want to go to New York and who have been nervously awaiting such an announcement, look up expectantly, check their ticket for the flight number, gather their baggage, turn around and set out with some urgency for gate 23.”

When Jesus says, “follow me”, any excuse is equivalent to a “no”.

So, how do we do it? How did these four men/brothers do it? Drop everything and follow Jesus. Barbara Brown Taylor, in her sermon on this passage, entitled “Miracle on the Beach”, says that the strangest thing about this story of the call of the

disciples is that they all – all four – went along with Jesus. Not just one, not just two, but all four who were called, accepted! He called, they followed, and we tend to give the credit to the disciples. What strength! What courage! What faith, to sacrifice everything! They didn't know Jesus. They weren't waiting for Jesus. Chances are they weren't even the religious type. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests to us that this is really not a hero story but a miracle story. Jesus speaks and things happen, not because of the recipient of grace but because of who Jesus is. And I think Barbara Brown Taylor is on to something.

Jesus says to the leper, “go and be made clean” and he is healed.

Jesus says “stand up and take your mat home” and the paralyzed man stands up.

Jesus says, “go, your faith has made you well,” and the blind man's sight is restored.

Jesus says, “follow me” and they drop whatever is in their hands.

“This is no story about the power of human beings to change their lives, to leave everything behind and follow. This is a story about the power of God – to walk right up to a quartet of fishermen and work a miracle, creating faith where there was no faith, creating disciples where there were none a moment before.” And they were probably not who we would have chosen to lead the community of Christians into the future. Ordinary men, and not highly skilled at preaching and teaching. Their skill was mending nets and fishing. If they did anything at all under their own power it was to allow themselves to be open to where Jesus might lead them. Christ calls and the disciples let their nets wash out to sea.

Ernest Campbell, professor of preaching and worship at Princeton Theological Seminary, and previous pastor of the Riverside Church, New York City, and First

Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan says two things in his sermon on this passage which I want to share with you.

1) In the Greek, the word “to follow” means to share the road with someone. For us to follow someone means that the person we are following is more interested in the future than the past. You cannot be moving forward on the road of life if your sight is on the past. To follow Jesus is to have a loyalty to the future. With Jesus it is not where you have been that matters but where you are going; not whether you have fallen, but whether you will get up; not whom you’ve hurt in the past, but whom you will help in the future.

2) “Follow me” are the two words that ought to monitor what we do and say and think as committee members, council members, community leaders, pastors, and members of the congregation. Is this action, this decision, this policy, this attitude, this activity or ministry of the church of such a quality that it is moving our church in the direction Jesus is going?” Of course, we need to be open and receptive to the direction Jesus is going. We may not always agree on what it means to follow Jesus, but we cannot question the fundamental presumption that we are here to follow Jesus not our own desires or preferences. We are not a social club or social workers. We are not professional worshippers. We are called to follow Jesus - be disciples - not because of who we are, but because of who Jesus is.

It doesn’t really matter whether an action is profitable or popular, whether it is practical or realistic. What matters, only and always, is whether it can be understood as following Jesus. “Follow me”. To follow Jesus is to have a vision of the world from God’s perspective. To follow Jesus is to embrace the future. To follow Jesus is to have a star by which to steer and a horizon to watch. Every time he comes across our way and

bids us follow, he creates a crisis of sorts. Will we follow where Christ leads us or will we choose our own ways? Will we make excuses? Will we pursue our own preferences? Will we support the church of Jesus Christ, or will we prefer to create the church that reflects and pursues our own agendas? For when that command registers in our souls, we can choose to die to God and live to self, or to die to self and live to God.

And Matthew doesn't want us to spend a whole lot of time standing and scratching our heads. We have a choice: to respond to Christ's call to discipleship, or not.