

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Sunday, January 22, 2023

“Follow Me”
Matthew 4:12-23

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

This morning our Gospel Lesson tells the story of an outrageous and unreasonable command. “As [Jesus] 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*’” (vv. 18-19). Now notice what *doesn’t* happen: there’s no prelude or introduction; Jesus doesn’t greet them, explain what he’s all about, or identify himself (cf. John 1:35-42). There’s no segue at all; Jesus doesn’t even say who he is; he just commands them: “Follow me!” That’s quite strange, isn’t it? Jesus doesn’t have any credibility with these two, “no real claim on their lives” (Topping)—and yet he just approaches and commands.

Jesus does offer a kind of explanation, but it’s an explanation that makes the exchange maybe even more bizarre: “Follow me,” he says, “and I will make you *fish for people*” (v. 19). What? If you’ve read the New Testament, or if you’ve attended church over the years, then *you’ve* become accustomed to this language... But pause a moment, and consider what an odd image this really is: if these fishermen were confused why a man they’d never met was ordering them to follow, well, they’re not going to feel less confused when he adds, cryptically, that they’ll become “people fishers.”

Now if you’d never heard this story before, if you were hearing this story for the very first time, and you had to guess *what’s going to happen next*, how would you expect these two fishermen to react? Well, maybe you’d expect some pushback, some opposition, or maybe—at the very least—*questions*! Questions like: “Who are you?” “Follow you where?” “What on earth is people-fishing?” These would all seem like reasonable questions in response to this most unreasonable command. So let’s listen in, and hear what questions and objections these fishermen will raise... “Immediately they left their nets and followed him” (v. 20).

That command to follow was bewildering enough, but their response is even more bewildering. These fishermen don’t pose any questions or raise any objections; they don’t ask for explanation or clarification: they just...follow, impulsively, rashly—and without even a moment’s hesitation! Notice that keyword, ‘immediately’ (εὐθὺς). There’s no delay to allow for deliberation and consideration: “immediately,” they follow Jesus

And that’s also really quite strange, isn’t it? This is not how grownups normally make major, life-changing decisions. And this is certainly not how we’d imagine ourselves responding! As one minister puts it: for the disciples here, she says, there’s “no job description, no interview, and no time to consider the pros and cons of the offer—just [a] preacher who appears on shore, shouts an invitation and walks on. To be honest,” she says, “I think I might have stayed [...] or dithered about what to do for so long that Jesus would have been a speck on the horizon before I made my move” (Anderson). I think we get that; the Presbyterian Church in Canada is, well, not known for its breakneck speed or impulsive decisions.

In all these different ways, the behaviour of these two fishermen just doesn't compute with our expectations and assumptions. And I think we'd prefer some sort of additional backstory to make this encounter more intelligible; I think we'd appreciate one or two extra verses to explain that they'd really just taken on this fishing gig grudgingly, that they'd been looking for an "out," that they'd both been yearning to hit the open and travel and go "find themselves"—*anything* to make this strange story conform to our expectations.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: "The call goes out, and without any further ado [follows] the obedient deed of the one called." He asks, "How is this direct relation between call and obedience possible? It is quite offensive to natural reason. Reason," he says, "seeks an explanation [...], psychological or historical. [...]. But the text is stubbornly silent on this point; in it, everything depends on call and deed directly facing each other. The text is not interested in psychological explanations [...]. Why not? Because" he writes, "Because there is only one good reason for the proximity of call and deed: *Jesus Christ himself*. It is he who calls. This is why [they] follow[...]. This encounter gives witness to [the] unconditional, immediate, and inexplicable authority [of Jesus, who] has authority to call and to demand obedience to his word. Jesus calls to discipleship, not as a teacher and a role model, but as the Christ, the Son of God" (DBWE 4:57).

This story from our Gospel Lesson seems strange to us, because it is. And we might prefer to neutralize that strangeness with recourse to some sort of sensible explanations. Yet that would miss the point—because the centre of this story is, in the end, not the impulsive fishermen but rather the compelling call of Christ: Jesus calls and they must follow, because, well—they *must*. It's a kind of irreducible moment: the calling of discipleship just can't be broken down into smaller explanations. The response of the disciples can't be explained away with psychological or personal details; there's nothing here that can make this calling story seem any less radical. They hear Christ's call and follow, and that's—I don't know—that's it. Oddly, we just can't explain this moment of calling except by describing it: Christ calls, disciples follow.

And I think we see this in our own lives of faith; can any of us really explain how we became disciples of Christ? Did any of us weigh the pros and cons, compare the bottom line, and then make an analytically informed decision? Or did we first follow Christ because, well, we did, we had to, we must—simply because Christ called and calls us, and what else could we do but listen to his voice?

I invite you to take a look at the stained-glass window on the cover of the Order of Service (or, if you're sitting in that back corner, you can just enjoy the original). Notice—and this is something I've pointed out before—that the one standing is holding a weighted net, heavily weighted with stones. But if you look closely, the disciple's hands aren't clenched or even tightened; see *this* is the moment when his fingers are beginning to loosen, when the net starts slipping through his opening hands... With his attention and his gaze fixed on the calling Christ, the fisherman has already begun to follow; the fisherman is becoming a disciple as he lets the net—and, really, lets his previous life—fall away.

We may wish for more explanation in our Gospel Lesson, but those fishermen simply respond to Jesus with faith, which is always a form of trust. All those questions that they never asked—Who is this man calling them? What's he all about? Where will he lead them?—all those questions will, eventually, be answered...but only *after* the disciples take a chance and risk

following Jesus. Our impulse, I think, would be to ask those questions first—to iron out all the details of discipleship in advance—but instead, those fishermen commit themselves to follow Christ, so that—in following him—they will be able to ask and learn and grow. What discipleship involves will become clear only after they obey Christ’s calling to follow (DBWE 4:64). They will in fact learn *who* Jesus is and *what* he’s all about and *where* he’ll lead them—but these questions will only be met on the journey. As someone once pointed out to me, this “is just the start of a story that will unfold.”

And today, I wonder how this story could make us more open to hear and obey the calling of Christ in our lives—because the call to discipleship is not something that just happens once, and then it’s done; it’s not “Jesus called me, I became a Christian, the end.” Rather, the calling of Christ is, by the grace of God, a calling we may hear unexpectedly, surprisingly, in different stages and phases of life. We may be gripped powerfully by an unmistakable calling to accept some adventure of faith in obedience to Christ; or we may quietly feel a gentle sense of calling, a “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12) to do something new and meaningful in faithfulness to Christ. The calling to share in the compassion of Christ—this can take on many different forms, at different points in our lives.

And for us, the challenge is to open ourselves up to Christ’s calling—and to learn from our Gospel Lesson that this calling may come unexpectedly and abruptly, that we may be left with uncertainty and unanswered questions about what it all entails; and yet we may recognize that—because it is *Christ* calling—we simply must obey the one who loves us and calls us and promises to lead us. Amen.