

On Being Called

In our gospel reading, this morning, Matthew tells the story of the calling of the first disciples. When Jesus called to Simon and Andrew, *Immediately they left their nets and followed him.* The same thing happened with James and John: *Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.* I find myself interested by this word “immediately.” Doesn’t it seem strange that they all followed “immediately”? Don’t you think they would have at least hesitated before they dropped their nets, apparently without a backward glance, and left behind their families and their livelihoods, just because someone said “Follow me”?

What makes this even more surprising is that this wasn’t the usual response to God’s call. Throughout Hebrew Scripture, we hear stories of how the prophets who heard God calling tended to hesitate and protest and drag their feet—a pattern that one of my professors named “Call Waiting.” When God called Moses to lead the People of Israel out of their captivity in Egypt, Moses tried to claim that God had a wrong number, asking, *Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?* (Ex. 3:11) God did God’s best to reassure him, but Moses still didn’t want to take the call: *Why don’t I transfer you to my brother, Aaron?* Moses wasn’t alone in his reluctance. Do you remember Gideon? When God called him, *he* wanted Caller ID: . . . *show me a sign, [God], that it is you who speak to me.* (Judges 6:17) And how about Jonah? When Jonah heard the call, he tried to put God on hold—*indefinitely.*

The word “immediately” paints a wonderful contrast, depicting both Jesus’ power of persuasion and the first disciples’ eager response. But according to the scholars of the Jesus Seminar, it’s unlikely that it really happened that way. Matthew’s telling of the story follows the earlier Markan version almost word for word. And of Mark’s version, the scholars write:

No one believes that the call of Simon and Andrew happened exactly as Mark depicts it. If Jesus enlisted the four followers formally at all, they became disciples only after a period of time. Mark has preserved a story from the oral tradition that was designed to convey the essence of discipleship to all prospective followers: If you want to become a follower of Jesus, you must abandon your work, your family, give up all previous attachments, and help enlist others.

That’s a pretty daunting set of entrance requirements! I suspect that the prophets who responded to God’s call with such reluctance, such hesitation, such outright foot-dragging, understood that being called might prove to be pretty daunting. Moses and Gideon and Jonah were called to do things that they would have been much more comfortable not doing, and to become people that they really didn’t want to become. And sometimes God calls you and me to do things that we would be more comfortable not doing, and to become people we’re not really sure we want to become.

As Christians, we are all called to follow Christ, just as surely as Peter and Andrew, James and John. But accepting that call doesn't mean that we are signing up for easy lives. While I don't think following Jesus today requires that we abandon our work, our family, and give up all previous attachments, there are still some perfectly good reasons why we might not want to take God's call.

First of all, entering into relationship with Christ involves a willingness to be transformed by that relationship, a transformation—frightening thought—that we don't control. Look at the disciples. Simon Peter's quick temper often got him into trouble, and he deserted and denied Jesus when he needed him most. James and John angered the other disciples when they asked for preferential seating in heaven. But the beginning of Acts shows us just how much these disciples had been transformed. As they began their Pentecost ministry of preaching and healing, thousands were converted by the power of their words. Luke tells us that when the rulers of the temple *saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus.*

These were indeed “uneducated and ordinary men,” and yet these simple fishermen had been transformed by their discipleship into witnesses who would be faithful even into exile and death. But as part of this transformation there were some things—some very human characteristics—they had to give up. They had to give up anger and judgment, pride and greed, fear and cowardice, self-seeking and self-righteousness. And we will too.

Do you want to take this call?

When we accept the call to discipleship, it also puts us at odds with “the way things are.” This may bring a certain feeling of exile, a sense of no longer being at home in the world as it is. T. S. Eliot expressed this sense of exile strikingly in his Epiphany poem, “Journey of the Magi.” The narrator describes the hard journey across the desert and the arrival at the manger, and then goes on to say,

*All this was a long time ago, I remember
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.*

This birth, our new birth in Christ, can be “hard and bitter agony” for us, as we recognize how much suffering there is in our world, and how far away we are from realizing the “new creation” Jesus envisioned. We may also feel that we are among an “alien people clutching their gods.” The gods we have previously worshipped, the gods of our society— money, power, success, appearance, security— these gods now seem alien to us. As we look around us with the eyes of faith, we are “no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation.” We become increasingly aware of the brokenness of our world, and of our own part in that brokenness. Even more, we realize that God calls us not only to worship and praise, but to active participation in striving for God’s realm of justice and peace.

Do you want to take this call?

Finally, we may hesitate to take the call to discipleship when we understand that Christ doesn’t want our faith to be an individual and private affair. Jesus didn’t just call the first disciples to follow him. He called them to be fishers of people, to act with him, and for him, in spreading the good news. If we really believe that the vision of God’s kin-dom is good news, if our involvement in the beloved community of the church has made a difference in our lives, we shouldn’t be keeping this to ourselves. But how many of us are comfortable saying to someone, outside of those we see in church on Sunday, that trying to follow the teachings and example of Jesus is important to us?

I’m sure most of us know people— we may be among them— who have been completely turned off by those visible and public claimants to the name “Christian” who preach and practice intolerance and even hatred. But this makes it even more important for those of us who have a different vision of what it means to follow Christ to be visible and public in *our* identity as Christians. I, and many of my clergy colleagues, wore our clerical stoles as we marched in the Women’s Marches yesterday, to make a public statement of our belief that God cares about the equality, dignity, and rights of women.

Fishing for people doesn’t mean that we need to hold revival meetings, or proselytize door to door. But it may mean being willing to say that we attend church and that our church is important to us. It may mean going outside our comfort zone and inviting a friend or family member to come to church with us. Statistics shared at a Vermont Conference event, just a couple of years ago, indicated that *87% of people who come to a church and stay, do so because someone invites and brings them.* Sadly, though, *Only 2% of church people invite anyone.* No wonder the church has been in decline. If we think no one would accept, research also shows that more than 2/3 of people who don’t attend church *would* accept an invitation. Being visible and public in our identity also means being actively involved, *as a congregation*, in the life of our community.

Do you want to take this call?

The United Church of Christ Statement of Faith speaks of “the cost and joy of discipleship.” The costs I have spoken of are very real. We will feel growing pains as God transforms us into the people God wants us to be. We’ll no longer be quite at home in the world as it is, and we’ll want to try to make it a better place. And we will feel pushed way outside of our comfort zones by the challenge to share the good news of our faith.

But the joys are also very real. I have yet to have anyone tell me that they regret their spiritual journey— that they wished they could go back to being the person they were before they began their journey of deepening relationship with Christ. The inner transformation of discipleship tends to deepen our kindness, understanding, tolerance, compassion, generosity, forgiveness and gratitude. We like the person we are becoming, and others do, too. No longer feeling at home in the old dispensation pushes us toward the joy of working for change and of leading meaningful lives of witness and service. And the joy of “fishing for people” comes in recognizing that God has not called us to do any of this alone. God gathers us into the community of the church, where we love and support each other into becoming the best we can be, acting in the world with the love shown to us by Jesus. At some point, each of us was “fished” into this community, if not by a human agent, by the call of the Spirit. If we value what we have found here, then it can be nothing other than a joy to share it with others.

These are some of the costs and some of the joys of accepting God’s call. And we would be well within the tradition of the biblical prophets if we decided we didn’t want to take God’s call. Like Moses, we could protest that God has a wrong number, or try to transfer the call to someone else. Like Gideon, we could ask for Caller ID. Or like Jonah, we could put God on hold— indefinitely.

But in the end, each of these responded to God’s call, as did Peter and Andrew, James and John. Whether or not those fishermen beside the Sea of Galilee recognized it “immediately,” we know that they reached a point where they could do nothing else but follow. They didn’t yet know about the cost of discipleship. But something in Jesus must have given them a glimpse of the joy. Jesus calls each and every one of us to the cost and the joy of discipleship.

Are you ready to take this call?

Amen.