

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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Matthew 4:12-23 (NRSV)

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. [13] He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, [14] so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

[15] "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles--
[16] 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."

[17] From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

[18] 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. [19] And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." [20] Immediately they left their nets and followed him. [21] 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. [22] Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

[23] 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.

FOLLOW ME, EASIER SUNG THAN DONE

Our anthem this morning summarizes the Scripture very well. "Fisherman Peter by the sea drop you net now and follow me. Brother James son of Zebedee, leave your fishing and follow me."

That's such a pretty, catchy melody. I've been singing it all week. And when you're singing that tune it seems like such an easy, natural thing to do. Just drop everything right now and follow Jesus. Join the song. Make the commitment.

But, then you think about what that really means, and you realize that following Jesus involves quite a bit more than just singing a catchy tune. Following Jesus is sometimes about leaving your job and your family and your hometown to go who knows where, wherever Jesus takes you.

That was fine for those disciples of old. But, are we called to sing the same tune? Must we drop everything right now and follow Jesus. After all, what's the rush? We can follow Jesus tomorrow when it's more convenient.

Maybe Jesus calls certain people, special people to drop everything and follow him, but surely Jesus is not calling me. We all have our reasons why Jesus is not calling us. Maybe we think that we're too young to be called or maybe we think that we're too old or too busy. Maybe we have a business to run or a family to raise.

DROPPING THEIR NETS

But, you know the same was true of those first disciples. They had family and friends. They had responsibilities.

In our lesson for today we learn that James and John had important responsibilities. Their father Zebedee ran a fishing business. My commentary tells me that fishing was a pretty lucrative business in those days. James and John were lucky to have a dad who provided them with a good living and a future.

But, when Jesus called, the boys without a word dropped their nets and left old Zeb in the boat by his lonesome. Do you think this decision to follow Jesus might have caused a rift in the family? I think it's possible.

In Mark's gospel we learn that at one time Jesus and his disciples were so busy healing and teaching and so hemmed in by the crowd that they don't even have time to eat. Jesus' own family thought, "This is crazy. They're all going to starve to death."

And so Jesus' own family came to "take charge of him" because obviously this kingdom of God stuff was getting out of hand. They said that poor Jesus was "out of his mind." (Mark 3: 20-21)

If Jesus' own family thought he was asking too much, don't you think the family of these disciples also thought it was to drop everything, to leave everything and everyone to follow this wandering rabbi? Sure they did. Following Jesus just didn't seem like a smart career move.

So why did those first disciples do it? What was it about Jesus that caused them to drop everything, leave home and follow?

Had they heard Jesus preach on some earlier occasion? Were they touched by his charismatic personality? Did they believe that he was a military Messiah, come to lead his people to political freedom?

We don't really know. Some or all of these factors could have played a role in their decision to follow Jesus.

THE HUMAN FACE OF GOD

But, I think that there was more to their discipleship than just a desire to go with a winner. I think these first disciples saw the human face of God in Jesus. And I think that this that made everything else in their life seem unimportant by comparison.

I've often said that St. Augustine had it right. Augustine said that we all have a God shaped hole in our hearts. We might seek to fill that void with all sorts of things. We try to fill the void with our work. We try to fill that void with our family. We try to fill that void with the trinkets that this world has to offer. We try to fill that void with diversions like sports or hobbies.

But, none of those things can take the place of the one thing that we really need. Our hearts will always be restless until we find our rest in God. We need God just like we need food or water or air.

The Psalmist put it well when he wrote, "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God." (Psalm 42:1) When the Bible tells us that we were made in God's image I think that it means we were made to be in relationship with God. It is built into our very DNA so to speak.

So, when Jesus called those first disciples, they did not hesitate. They followed him because they sensed in Jesus the presence of God. The disciples responding to the call of Jesus is a kind of miracle. Their call was special, and it was costly.

Later in Matthew's gospel Peter on behalf of the other disciples would verbalize the cost of discipleship. Peter said, "We have left everything and followed you." Matthew 12:27

DOES JESUS CALL US?

That was then, but what about now? Does Jesus call us?

When we recognize the cost of discipleship we might not be so anxious to say yes. This call story often seems troubling to those of us who feel comfortable with our present life. Leaving everything to follow Jesus doesn't seem like such a great idea.

And yet, if we really believe what we say that we believe, if we really believe that God was in Christ, then what could possibly be more important? What could be more important than following Jesus?

When we consider the call of Jesus it's important to remember that the call comes to us in many different places and in many different ways. And the call of Jesus is not a once and done deal. Throughout our life we are called to move in response to Jesus' call. It is a commitment that we must affirm again and again.

CALLED AND RECALLED

All the gospels tell the story of how those first disciples struggled to keep following Jesus. Quite often they faltered when the path became narrow and steep.

At one point they all abandoned him, and Jesus stood alone against the forces of evil. Even after the crucifixion and the resurrection, the disciples who had a hard time responding to the call of Jesus.

For example, in the gospel of John, the risen Christ appeared to all the disciples. He charged them to proclaim the gospel to the whole world. He breathed on them and gave them the power of the Holy Spirit. It was almost like a new creation story. These disciples were recreated by the Spirit of God in Christ. Even the most skeptical disciple, doubting Thomas is convinced by the appearance of the risen Christ.

So what do the disciples do next? Do they boldly go into the world with the good news with this message of forgiveness and hope? No, in the last chapter of John we learn that they revert to their old way of life. They go fishing. They return to what is comfortable and familiar.

I think this is true for many of us. We may from time to time commit to following Jesus. But, it is hard to stay on that journey. When the road gets steep and the way gets narrow, we want to turn back. We have this desire to return to what is familiar and comfortable.

That's why many churches have no sense of mission. It is uncomfortable to reach beyond what we have been. And so we run the same old programs the same old way year after year.

I would suggest with the prophet Isaiah that God is about to do a new thing in our life and in our church. Like those first disciples, one calling is not enough for us. We need to hear the call of Jesus over and over again.

As Jesus called and "recalled" those first disciples many times so Jesus calls and recalls us many times as well. As Jesus had to remind those first disciples over and over again of the importance and meaning of their call so Jesus must remind us as well.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Any good organization needs a statement of purpose, an overarching goal that guides the actions and decisions of that group. It's true of businesses. It's true of political parties. It's even true of families.

All groups need to be able to say definitively, "This is who we are. This is what it means to work for Ford Motor Company. Quality is job one. This is what it means to be a Republican. This is what it means to be a Democrat.

This is what it means to be a part of the Allen family. This is our history, and this is what we stand for above everything else.”

So, what is that statement of purpose in the church? What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? What are we called to do?

Have we been called to go fishing or have we been called to be fishers of men and women? I think that like those first disciples we too have been called to be fishers of men and women.

To put it another way, job one in the church is to reach out to people in the name of Jesus Christ. People take priority in God’s kingdom, and we have good news for all people.

Whatever we do in the church must be guided by this one important principle. We are in the business of seeking others in the name of Christ. And if anything we are doing or saying in the church hinders others from coming to Christ, then we need to stop doing it.

Stan Ott who is leading several churches in our Presbytery in a process of transformation summarizes the mission of the church in three words: reach, grow and send. I think that’s a very good way to talk about what it means to be fishers of men and woman. We reach out to others, we grow disciples, we teach them what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, and then we send them out to reach others.

This should be a never ending process in the church.

REPENT

The Bible tells us that Jesus went around preaching “Repent ... the Kingdom of God is at hand.” He was telling people, “You don’t have to live the way you’re living. You can live in a different way. You can go in a different direction.”

In fact, that’s what the word repent means. It doesn’t mean just feeling sorry and depressed about the fact that we have failed in some way. Repent primarily means to go in a different direction. I believe that all of us are always in the process of changing direction in response to the call of Jesus. We are always in the process of repenting.

And in order to take our life in a different direction it is necessary to have hope. It's necessary to believe that there is a loving God who brings the world redemption. It's necessary to believe that God and His Kingdom are not far away and long ago but close, here and now.

And that's exactly the message that Jesus brings us. The Kingdom is here and now. Repent and believe. Go in a different direction. Come follow me.

If Jesus calls us to repent to go in a different direction, I wonder what we must leave behind to follow him. Those first disciples left family and friends and job to follow Jesus. What do we need to leave behind in order to reach out to others in Jesus' name?

At our Bible study we suggested that sometimes we have to leave behind certain personal characteristics.

Some need to leave behind a sense of guilt that controls their every action. Some need to leave behind debilitating anger.

Some need to leave behind an overdeveloped sense of anxiety about what others may think. Some need to leave behind an attachment to the things that this world has to offer.

Whatever competes with the call of Jesus must be left behind.

FORMULA FOR A NEW DIRECTION

Remember when Peter tried to walk on water with Jesus? When Peter took his eyes off Jesus and began to focus on the water, that's when he began to sink. And the same is true for us. When we take our eyes off Jesus and focus on the deep water, then we begin to sink.

We need to take our eyes off the water and turn our eyes upon Jesus. We should learn to treat problems not as reasons to be afraid but as opportunities to listen for the call of Jesus.

Stan Ott that church transformation leader that I talked about earlier says that we live in what he calls a "high velocity" world. He means that things in our world are changing at a high rate of speed.

But, unfortunately, the church is typically a “low velocity” organization. The church changes very slowly, if at all. Instead of thinking about what we are doing and why we are doing it, the church just continues to run the same old program year after year.

To illustrate, Stan told of going to a celebration of the work of the Presbyterian Women in a particular church. He was a bit bored with the program so he strolled back to a display area where the women had copies of their program for the past 40 years. He took the current year’s program in hand and then walked down to where they had a copy of the program they ran forty years ago.

And guess what? The program had not changed one bit in forty years. And the women wondered why they were not having any luck recruiting new members! Perhaps it is because society has seen tremendous change in the past forty years. What we did to reach people forty years ago may not work today.

Now don’t misunderstand. I’m a great believer in the old saying, “If it ain’t broke don’t fix it.” And certainly the message of the gospel does not change.

But, I do believe that Jesus is often calls us to follow Him in new directions.

We like the certainty of always doing things the way we’ve done them before. But, I think that Jesus often calls us to try new things and go new places to keep our faith fresh. The journey itself forces us to listen for the call of Jesus and trust his Spirit instead of trusting in ourselves.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BOAT

I’ve already referred to that story in the gospel of John where the disciples seem to abandon the call of the risen Christ to fish for men and women. Instead, once Jesus is gone they just go back to fishing. But, they don’t have much luck. They fish all night and don’t catch a thing.

Then, as they make their way toward the shore, a stranger on the shore calls to them. He says, “Cast your net on the other side of the boat.”

They reluctantly give it a try. And what happens? Their nets are so full of fish that the boat begins to sink. It's then that they recognize that the one who called them to cast their nets on the other side is none other than the risen Christ.

Could Jesus be calling us to cast our nets on the other side of the boat?
Could Jesus be calling us to try something new in order to reach more people with the gospel?

Stan Ott has developed a practical way to cast the net on the other side of the boat that is a modification of how some businesses now work. When the church confronts a new problem, a problem that cannot be solved by last year's program he suggests an approach called action learning.

The church gives a group the mandate to discover what is really going on in regard to a problem, discern what Jesus might be calling the church to do and then do it. And this is the radical point. The permission to implement what this group feels called to do is given in advance.

I can understand why he set it up that way. Over the years I've noticed that we've wasted much time and energy in the church debating whether we should do this or that program. And quite often we decide to do nothing at all.

Why do we have this aversion to trying anything creative? Why are we so reluctant to cast our nets on the other side of the boat? Quite often the decision making bodies in the church are split between those who always want to run last year's program and those who try something new.

Sometimes conflict even develops between these two groups as each one advocates for their own position. And so we do what we think is the safe thing. We do nothing at all.

Maybe the truth of the matter is that we just don't know. The new thing may work or the old thing work or maybe nothing we're suggesting will work. More often than not that's true. We don't know the answer to the problem.

But, even though that's often true, that's an answer that can scare us. In that situation we're like Peter sinking into the sea or discouraged disciples returning from a long night of fishing with no results. We let fear determine our action. Instead of moving forward we hold on for dear life.

I think that we can change. I think that from time to time like the disciples in our lesson for today, we catch a glimpse of something higher. By the grace of God instead of holding on to what we have, we find the courage to drop our nets, leave home and follow Jesus.

Security can never be found in our job or our family or our church. Security, eternal security can only be found in following Jesus. So why don't we do it? Why don't we follow Jesus in our churches, in our families and in our personal life?

Jesus calls us today.

In order to find the hymn I wanted for today's service I had to have it printed in the bulletin from the old "red" Presbyterian hymnal. The hymn was written by a minister's wife (Cecil Frances Alexander) to go along with a sermon her husband preached on this very passage. I'm sure most of you have sung it many times.

The words are simple, but I think that the theology is profound. So, before we sing the words I want you to listen to them carefully as I read.

Jesus Calls Us

Jesus calls us; o'er the tumult
Of our life's wild, restless sea,
Day by day His sweet voice soundeth,
Saying, "Christian, follow Me."

Jesus calls us from the worship
Of the vain world's golden store,
From each idol that would keep us,
Saying, "Christian, love Me more."

In our joys and in our sorrows,
Days of toil and hours of ease,

Still He calls in cares and pleasures,
“Christian, love Me more than these.”

Jesus calls us: by Thy mercies,
Savior, may we hear Thy call,
Give our hearts to Thine obedience,
Serve and love Thee best of all.

Let us commit ourselves to following Jesus as we sing together.