

“LEARNIING TO FOLLOW”

Matthew 4:12-25

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The church is and has been many things to those who count themselves part of it – sanctuary, cultural center, school, holy ground, powerful institution, support in times of need, giver of blessing for life’s milestones, keeper of a theological and ethical framework, a voice for truth, a place to belong, a mission to serve. But above, beneath, beyond, and before all those things, the church is people trying to follow Jesus. Sometimes we do that well and faithfully, most of the time we stumble along doing the best we can; and, as a little dip into any part of church history will show, we have sometimes failed spectacularly. But following Jesus has from the beginning been the church’s reason to be. Following Jesus is at the heart of who we are, and it’s at the heart of Matthew’s description of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

Looking at our gospel reading from the fourth chapter, I can discern three distinct parts to Matthew’s story.

Part 1 – Jesus comes to Capernaum from Nazareth and steps into public life with a sort of announcement: “Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Part 2 – In the way of itinerant preachers of the time, Jesus reaches out to recruit some disciples, some people who will go with him and support him and share in his life and mission.

Part 3 – With these newly-recruited disciples in place, the public ministry goes into full swing – teaching, talking about the reign of God, and healing people.

It’s the second part that I mainly want to focus on. It’s the heart of the story, really. What Jesus says about repenting and the kingdom of heaven is important, but it’s a very general statement (or you might call it a sermon). But the second part is where things get ... personal. Jesus’ words are directed, not at whomever happens to be listening, but to Simon and Andrew and James and John.

There are several things we can notice here:

These disciples are not called one by one, but together. From the beginning, this is a community.

Jesus doesn’t give them much warning; as far as we can tell, his invitation is more-or-less out of the blue. And he doesn’t give them much to go on to make their decision, either. What does it mean? What’ll they be expected to do? Where are they going? Is there a downside? Nothing.

And yet, amazingly, they *do* follow him. “Immediately,” according to Matthew. Most of us, I bet, find this hard to imagine. I sure do.

Of course, it could be that they were ready. Maybe they heard Jesus right away when he started to say, “repent!” and maybe that spoke to some need they felt for a new direction. Perhaps it was the idea of the kingdom of heaven that caught their attention; like most folks in their community they probably longed for God’s peace and justice to overcome the oppressive rule of Roman occupation. Still, leaving their whole life behind seems like a big step.

Perhaps one thing that made it possible was that Jesus’ call came to them in a way that spoke to *them*. Follow me, leave the boats and nets, and I will make you fish for people.

Maybe like me you went to Sunday School and sang songs about being “fishers of men.” The fishing metaphor has been a huge in the way we have talked about evangelism.

But what if those words were specifically for those fisherfolk at Capernaum? Tapping into their knowledge and skills, their ways of thinking, the wisdom of their work, who *they* were? Letting them know *they* had something to offer. Letting them know the call was really and truly *for them*?

Can we imagine how Jesus call to others might be different?

To a farmer: Follow me, and I will show you how to plant the seeds of faith.

To a poet: Follow me, and I will give you words to open hearts to the love of God.

To a construction worker: Follow me, and I will supply you with materials to build a strong community of believers.

To an administrator: Follow me, and I will help you organize people and resources to do God’s work.

To a scientist: Follow me, and I will teach you to ask the questions that lead to new understandings.

To a teacher: Follow me, and I will teach you how to help others learn about God’s love.

To a health care worker: Follow me, and I will show you how to bring healing to the hurting and to foster healthy community.

You can play around with this idea later, see what you can come up with! 😊

Perhaps hearing his call in the terms of our own knowledge and skills, our ways of thinking, the wisdom of our work and experience can help us see that the call is for us, too. Perhaps it's *not* crazy to believe that we can be part of the work of God's reign.

The point is that there are lots of ways to follow Jesus, lots of ways to think about what following Jesus means. And we all have something to offer. This doesn't mean we don't need to repent, and turn around and go a different way. It doesn't mean we don't have things to learn and room to grow in our faith and a need to be more attentive or obedient to God's way. But following Jesus doesn't mean we have to become someone we aren't. We don't have to somehow get to a better place before we start; we begin right where we are. Jesus meets us right where we are, and says, "I want *you* to follow me."

I don't know if we can, any of us, follow as readily and boldly as James, John, Peter, and Andrew seem to have done. But maybe we can learn a little bit from their journey.

Here's something else I noticed about Jesus' recruiting of these first disciples: there's no training seminar, nothing that we'd recognize as an on-boarding process for new hires. They learn to follow Jesus... by following him. Watching, listening, absorbing his teaching, being with him, witnessing alongside him the needs and brokenness and lostness and hopes of those who came to see Jesus, seeing his compassion, enjoying his stories. Together, they learned his way of service, the transforming power of love, how to be a community, the necessity of repentance. They heard good news. They rejoiced in new life. They encountered God. They experienced the reign of heaven. They became... church.

We can't partake exactly that same experience those first followers of Jesus shared. But we, too, learn to follow... by following. We immerse ourselves in the gospels, in the stories of Jesus' life, in his teachings and the stories he told. We watch and listen to those people whose lives reflect Jesus. We go to places and among people where healing is needed. Look for the face of Jesus in the faces of the suffering. We listen with our hearts. We keep attentive for good news. We commit to community. We see what love can do. We rejoice in good news. We follow, as best we can. We repent when we go wrong. And we become... church.

Resources:

Matthew (Interpretation Commentary) by Douglas R.A. Hare

Matthew for Everyone (volume 1) by Tom Wright

"Calling Disciples" by Lisa Ann Moss Degrenia, from revlisa.com