



"Signing Up"

Scripture – Mark 1:14-20

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, January 24, 2021

Don was pushing his cart through the produce section of Whole Foods when he stopped to pick up apples. He pondered all that was in the bin before him. Red delicious, Winesap, Gala, Granny Smith, Fuji, Pink Lady. He was so amazed by the number varieties that he counted them. There were twelve different kinds of apples. Can you guess which one he chose? None of them. There were so many choices he couldn't decide. He had a similar experience when he walked into Starbucks and read through the menu. Blonde Roast, Pike Place Roast, and a featured Dark Roast. There were espresso shots, mochas, Macchiatos, and not one, not two, but 11 different lattes! He felt overwhelmed.

"In this book, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*, psychologist, Barry Schwartz says that sometimes, offering fewer choices is better than offering many. (Too many choices) can lead to paralysis and indecision. Reducing consumer choices can reduce anxiety for shoppers. To test this theory, a supermarket set up a stand where customers could sample 24 varieties of jelly. They could try as many as they liked and then buy them at a discount. The next day, the owners carried out the same experiment with only six flavors. They sold ten times more jelly on day two." People could handle six flavors, but 24 flavors led to indecision.

Americans love self-determination and the freedom to choose, and we imagine that the more choices, the better. But there seems to be a point where too many choices overwhelm us.¹

What if there was one central choice you can make that would guide you with many of the other decisions you must make? I don't mean the decisions about what to eat or drink or wear, but the weightier decisions about which leaders to trust, what moral choices to make, where to find joy, meaning, and satisfaction.

Today's text from the Gospel of Mark falls at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He has not yet revealed his wisdom; he has not decreed a command, nor has he shared a parable. He has not healed a broken down body nor has he restored a sin-sick soul.

At this stage, Jesus is a one-man movement, so the task at hand is to recruit. Try to picture in your mind Jesus winding his way around the black basalt stones on the bank of the Sea of Galilee – which is actually a large, oval shaped fresh water lake. He peers out across the blue-green water and is focused on a small boat with two fishermen. He watches them toss their net out across the water. They wait for it to sink, and then they give a mighty tug. They haul it back in hoping to snag a few fish in the web.

In my mind's eye, I see them tossing their net, time after time, catching a few fish here and there, but no grand catch. Their backs are turning red as the sun beats down and their foreheads are drenched with sweat.

After watching them for a while, Jesus cups his hands around his mouth calls out in a booming voice: "Come, follow me, and I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of fish."

According to the Gospel of Mark, they immediately bring the boat ashore and follow Jesus.

With two in tow, Jesus continues walking along the shoreline until he spots two brothers among a group of men. They are mending their nets. Jesus calls on them to follow him and the two brothers, James and John, drop the nets, walk away from their father and other fishermen, and follow Jesus.

What prompted these four to follow Jesus so promptly? Had they already met him? Was there a compelling charisma about Jesus? Were they simply weary of the fragrance of fish? Might they have been longing for adventure?

Why do YOU follow Jesus? Do you find him compelling? Do his teachings help you make sense of life? Has he saved you from despair? Does he give you a meaningful purpose? Is he your light of hope when darkness appears to be winning the day? Do you ever question whether following Jesus is the right thing to do? You are bound to know people who used to be a follower but have drifted away. Are you making a mistake by remaining part of the Body of Christ?

Kaj Munk was a Danish pastor and playwright who protested against Hitler for invading Denmark and for killing Jews. He was executed at age 45 as a martyr to his faith in Christ. Before he was murdered at night by the Gestapo, he had written these words: *"Perhaps it is all mistake, this business about Christianity. Sometimes it really looks to me like that. Perhaps all this talk about God and Jesus and the salvation of humanity is just a collection of fairytales. And I am a minister. Perhaps that is a mistake too. Perhaps a mistake to preach love and forgiveness in a hate torn world, to rescue those who are in need, to teach the children, to comfort the lonely and the dying. But if it is a mistake, then it is a beautiful mistake. If Christianity should turn out, after all, to be true, then unbelief will have been a very ugly mistake."*

Following Jesus helps us to clarify the direction of our lives and helps us to deal with the important decisions that come our way. Following Jesus forges our convictions and sculpts our core.

Peter Marty, the publisher of *The Christian Century* magazine writes, "The kind of person we are at the center determines everything else about us. The choices, commitments, and decisions we make stem from who we are from the inside out. If there is no center, life becomes a drifting enterprise with no sustaining purpose."²

That is why we do not commit to following Jesus only once. It is a commitment we make every day. No, not every day. Every hour. Much of the time we do it in subtle ways or without thinking, simply by being compassionate or generous or forgiving or respectful. Other times we follow Jesus in more seismic ways – when we are called to make an unpopular decision or a significant sacrifice or a courageous stand. And, yes, some days we do a better job of it than other days.

Following Jesus gives us a purpose and takes us to surprising places. We end up doing things we never dreamed of doing. We gain confidence that we are heading in the right direction.

Following Jesus injects our lives with vitality. In him, we can find strength to endure life's storms, guidance in times of confusion, peace in times of anxiety, forgiveness when we have made a mess of things, a purpose for living, a community of caring people, joy in times of sadness and hope when the bright flame of the sun seems to have been extinguished.

Army chaplain, Major Ivan Arreguin has seen many overseas deployments during his military career. But last spring, he was deployed to a New York City hospital during the height of that city's coronavirus pandemic.

He said that when he showed up, "Doctors and nurses began weeping, and saying 'Thank you for coming.' They were working long hours and dealing with so much death. They would pull him aside and he would listen to their anxieties and fears and sadness; then pray for their strength."

One day his superior told him that a veteran had died of COVID-19. He asked Ivan to preside over the memorial ceremony.

Ivan says he did not know the man. He says, "Never saw a picture of this individual. And yet, I understood our bond."

He recalls the scene that followed: Soldiers pulled the man's body out of a refrigerated trailer – a makeshift morgue. The body was in a black bag. Soldiers stood at attention as Ivan led the military escort to a nearby hearse. He said a prayer and nobody moved until the hearse drove away.

Ivan says, "As a chaplain, I took an oath to respond to the needs of my nation: to care for the wounded, to nurture the living, and to honor the fallen. And I am so grateful that I was given that opportunity to serve."

When we decide to follow Jesus, we too sign on to serve: to care for the wounded, to nurture the living, and to honor the fallen. And in such serving, we ignite a spirit of joy deep in our core.

Jesus called out to four fishermen who were doing their ordinary work on what seemed like an ordinary day. But they sensed a tug at their heart and, however faintly, heard a whisper in their souls that he was the one who could show them the way to an extraordinary life. And that same one calls you and calls me. I pray we will answer his call.

NOTES

1. Don McMin, "The Paradox of Choice – why it's better to offer fewer choices," December 8, 2020.
2. Sylvie Lubow, "A U.S. Army Chaplain, Deployed in His Own Country, Honors Pandemic Victims," *NPR Weekend Edition*, November 14, 2020.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Loving God, you call us ... You call in a voice that startles from slumber, and in gentle whispers we must strain to hear; with striking gestures that demand our attention, and with subtle invitations that stir our souls. You call us to expressions of faith that flow freely from our hearts, and to acts of faithfulness that stretch us to imagine a world we never dreamed possible. You call us to hold fast to your hope, to embrace your truth, and to open wide our arms and receive your love. Call to us now, O God; we yearn to hear your voice ...

Many of us come before you with hearts that are heavy ... As the pandemic rages, as the death toll rises, we worry for family and friends, for community and country, for neighbors in need throughout the world. We grieve the many lives lost; we grieve the many livelihoods lost. We long for a return to normal and we lament that — for too many — life will never be “normal” again. Hold this, our sorrow, O God, and show us the path toward healing.

And, yet — despite our grief — these same hearts also sing for joy and beat with hope. There is much for which we are grateful: for cherished bonds with family and friends, for communities that surround us with love and support, for opportunities to heed your call and practice our faith.

As our nation marks the beginning of a new presidential term, help each of us embrace opportunities for new beginnings. Some among us meet this moment with relief and hope ... others with ambivalence or anxiety. Yet, no matter where we stand on the political spectrum, you call us to stand united in faith. By your Spirit, make us agents of healing and hope that we might “raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.”¹

Gracious God — You are merciful beyond measure and abounding in steadfast love. Help us, we pray, to pour out this grace and love so that it might bless others near and far. Call to us again, and empower us to be instruments of your mercy, that we might love in the same way that you love us — with passion, with fierce hope, with challenge as with comfort. We pray in the name of the one who showed us the breadth and depth of your love, the one who taught us how to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

¹ Amanda Gorman, “The Hill We Climb” (Recited at the Inauguration of the 46th President of the United States, January 20, 2021).