



“Called to Follow”
Scripture – Matthew 4:18-22
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, January 26, 2020

Debie was in her early teens when she heard a passionate preacher challenge the members of her congregation to dedicate their lives to Christ and to follow Jesus wherever he might lead. She felt exhilarated as she imagined living “the radical, sold-out-for-Jesus life the minister described.” Yet, there was also an element of fear because – whether the preacher meant it or not – what she heard was that she would have to become “someone fundamentally different from who she was.” Her introverted ways simply would not do. She would need to become an outgoing person who commanded attention. She would have to trash her dreams of becoming a writer. She would be required to leave the U.S. behind and “head to some far flung corner of the world she had never heard of.” She thought she needed to relinquish everything that made her pulse quicken and become someone other than who she was.¹ Is that what God demands when we follow the way of Jesus?

For some people, that is exactly what it means. If your God is money, power, or pleasure; if your focus is only on yourself; if you harm rather than heal; if you lie and scheme; if your way of being destroys rather than builds up, then a radical change is definitely what is required. But your presence here suggests that you may not need a major overhaul. Each of us could use some adjustments, but not necessarily total reconstruction.

If you have been around the church for some time, today’s gospel reading is familiar. To set the context, Jesus has been baptized by John and he has been victorious in his first major encounter with temptation – 40 difficult days in the desert, but he emerges undeterred. He is about 30 years old and he is on the threshold of his ministry.

We discover Jesus is 15 miles away from his hometown, Nazareth, walking the banks of the Sea of Galilee. It is not really a sea at all, but a charming freshwater lake, greenish-blue in color. It is more or less the shape of an egg – 13 miles from north to south, and eight miles wide. In the time of Jesus, it was a major source of fish, so it is not surprising that as Jesus walks along the shore, he spots fishermen.

Jesus was not a fisherman. He was either a carpenter or a stone mason. Most of us grew up being told that Jesus was a carpenter, but the Greek word “tekton” actually means “builder.” He may have been handy with both wood and stone. Whatever the case, his profession was clearly not fishing. So, why did Jesus recruit fishermen? Why not carpenters and stone masons? The Bible falls silent on the question.

I would like to create a mental scene for you, so please switch on your internal imaging system. Picture Jesus strolling along the edge of the lake and stopping to gaze at a boat not far from shore. He watches as two men attempt to land a catch. They gather up their net and then let it fly out over the water. The net fans out like a large flat plate with an umbilical cord attached that one of the men is grasping. It is an art to throw it just right so the net doesn’t hit the water in a tangled mess, but is an elegant circle. When the net lands on the surface, the tiny

weights around its outer rim pull the net toward the bottom. The men allow the net to sink for a few seconds, and then give it a strong yank. As they pull, the rope acts like a drawstring, pulling the fanned out net together like a bag. They hope to capture a few fish in its netting.

I imagine Jesus watching them fling their net several times and seeing them come up empty after every throw. Observing their lack of success, Jesus shouts to grab their attention “Follow me and I will show you how to catch people.” These two may have been ready to give something else a whirl. Matthew writes: “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

With two fresh recruits in tow, Jesus continues meandering around the edge of the lake. Before long, he spots two young men sitting in a boat with their father mending their nets. Jesus invites them to come along. The brothers climb out of their boat, walk away from their father and join Jesus and the other two.

A colleague imagines the conversation between the father and his wife that evening. She says, “What do you mean, the boys aren’t coming home? They’ve joined with that wandering rabbi whose cousin is in prison? You’re joking, right?”²

What do you suppose prompted those four young men to follow Jesus? Were they simply bored and yearning for a new adventure? Were they tired of the life of a fisherman and the odor of fish? Fishing as a pastime is one thing. Fishing for a living is something else entirely.

We might expect the gospel to state that Jesus had a divine aura that made his invitation irresistible; however, the text again falls silent. No reason is given. However, what seems obvious is that when these first disciples joined Jesus, they were not entirely certain of what would be demanded of them. Jesus gave them only one clue. He said, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Did they have a clue of what Jesus meant?

I suspect they understood it to mean they would be recruiting. They would help Jesus round up a larger band of followers—but for what purpose? Surely they had second thoughts about dropping their nets and following Jesus into an unknown future.

Over the centuries, many have pointed to this text as a basis for evangelism. As those first followers were to bring others to Jesus, so are we. That is certainly true. However, some have misused the fishing metaphor to suggest we need to hook a soul for Jesus, or catch a boat load for Christ, with no genuine concern for the individual.

Why did Jesus use a fishing metaphor? Because they were fisherman! They could apply the nuances of fishing to attracting people to Jesus. Ask fishermen what is required to be successful and they will tell you patience, determination, the ability to handle failure, the desire to celebrate success, a hopeful outlook, and, when the water grows rough, courage.

When the fishermen decided to follow Jesus, they had little idea what it would mean for their lives, but their former self would not be obliterated. Jesus would harvest the good from who they were and magnify it so that they could become so much more.

The same is true with us. When we follow Jesus, in some ways we remain the same. But in significant ways we become something new, something more – more grateful, more generous, more forgiving, more determined, more disciplined, more courageous. God calls us in the circumstances of our lives to follow the way of Jesus. What does that look like for you?

When I ponder the ways it is manifested in the lives of many of our members, I see that some tune in rather than tune out the people in their orbit who are in pain, and they become a shoulder to weep on. Some follow Jesus by

taking seriously what it means for them to take care of God's creation. Some hear the plea of African Americans and begin to do their part in overcoming racism. Some witness the desperation of the Mam people in Guatemala and follow Jesus to the western highlands of the country. Some return from Israel/Palestine with a passion for a just and peaceful resolution to the 53 year old occupation. Some are touched by the opioid crisis and begin to support education efforts to save lives. Some follow Jesus to people who are homeless and spend the night at church so that the family can stay together in a warm and inviting space. Some drive people without a car to a doctor's appointment and on the way become a caring listener. Some follow Jesus to a child who needs an inspiring mentor to help them attain the education they need to succeed. Many are generous donors to the ministry and mission of the church.

When those four fishermen began to follow Jesus, they did not know where it would lead or all that would be expected of them. But they discovered that as they threw their lot with Jesus they tapped into a source of power they had never known. They became opponents of evil. They became healers of wounds. They became light in places of darkness.

Jesus stands on the shoreline of our lives and calls out to each of us to follow him. He calls not once, but over and over in the particular situations of our lives. May you have the willingness to heed his call and to go where God needs you to go.

NOTES

1. Debie Thomas, "I Will Make You," *JourneyforJesus.net*, January 19, 2020.
2. Jennifer Moland-Kovash, "Living the Word," *TheChristianCentury.com*, January 8, 2020.