

## *Called to Follow*

<sup>NRS</sup> **Luke 5:1** Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God,<sup>2</sup> he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.<sup>3</sup> He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.<sup>4</sup> When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."<sup>5</sup> Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."<sup>6</sup> When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.<sup>7</sup> So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.<sup>8</sup> But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"<sup>9</sup> For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken;<sup>10</sup> and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."<sup>11</sup> When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

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Today's scripture lesson is what's known as a call story. It's the account of how someone was called to serve God in some particular way. Moses came upon a burning bush in the wilderness and heard God's call to go lead the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. (Exodus 3:10-12) The prophet Isaiah had a vision of God on the throne with seraphim flying around singing "Holy, holy, holy!" When the Lord asked, "Whom shall we send? Isaiah replied, "Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8)

Then there are the call stories in the New Testament where Jesus calls twelve people in particular to be his disciples and later commissions them to go teach others, to be apostles. Matthew and Mark both tell about Jesus calling Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, as well as James and John, the sons of Zebedee to come be his followers. The accounts are very short. Jesus was walking along, called to them and said "Follow me." And they immediately left what they were doing and went off with Jesus. Those stories really bothered me. The way I heard them preached and the way I pictured them in my mind, they sounded like the disciples had no idea who Jesus was, but they got up and left with him when he told them to do it. Was it a miracle like when Jesus told the waves to calm down out on the lake one night? Was it like they were in some sort of trance, or hypnotized, and just couldn't help themselves? Did they have any choice in the matter? Or did Jesus have some sort of aura around him, was he so charismatic that they instantly had faith and were hungry for companionship with him?

On the one hand, if the disciples were so mesmerized (if they were like zombies blindly following the command to follow), that seemed cruel and arbitrary. It didn't seem very loving to force someone to do something, no matter how righteous it was. Without choice in the matter, the disciples were just robots blindly following orders. On the other hand, if they had sudden, deep, compelling faith, that didn't really make sense either. If sudden faith was what happened, then what about all the people who didn't believe? Why didn't everybody jump up and follow Jesus? And what about me? When I was confused, when I had doubts, when I wasn't absolutely positive, what did that make me? Did that mean I was just Satan's pawn, being moved across the chessboard of life from one square of insufficient faith to another? Is instant, unquestioning faith the only true faith? Is it sinful to have questions?

Perhaps instantaneous response isn't the point of these stories. Perhaps there's a reason why so many of Jesus' parables are about seeds and growing, about journeys and relationships, about dough rising, and other processes that take time. Maybe these call stories aren't saying that we should have instant faith at all. The apostle Paul talks about how you can't trust until you believe, and you can't believe in what or whom you've never heard, and you can't hear what hasn't been proclaimed. (Romans 10:14) It's a process, according to Paul.

Perhaps these call stories in Matthew and Mark are very condensed so that the text can move on to other things. My nephew Joe, the one who plays the harp, went up to Raleigh, got his degree at State, and immediately went to work for a pharmaceutical company. Someone reading that statement two hundred years from now, might not know that there was a period of over five years involved before the “immediately” part took place.

And so it is that the account in Luke is helpful. All through the previous chapter in Luke we read about how Jesus had been preaching all around Galilee. He had taught in Capernaum and Nazareth and word about him was spreading throughout the region. Simon lived in Capernaum and Jesus went to his house one day after teaching in the synagogue and healing a man. When he arrived at Simon’s house, he found out that Simon’s mother-in-law was running a very high fever and Jesus healed her. So, as Luke relates the story of Christ’s early ministry, Simon knew Jesus before this event where Jesus teaches from Simon’s boat near the shore of the lake. Simon has heard of Jesus, he’s met him earlier, he’s even had him over to his home for dinner.

Rob Bell, the founding pastor of the Mars Hill church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, sheds more light on this call process during New Testament times. Jesus has been wandering around the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues in the towns. He’s begun to acquire a reputation as a rabbi, a teacher and interpreter of the scriptures. It was a great honor to be chosen to be the disciple – the student – of a rabbi. Only the very best students were chosen to be apprentices to a rabbi, a single great teacher who would be their mentor and guide. Very few became the disciple of a rabbi – certainly not common laborers who lived in the backwaters of the land of Palestine. So, when Jesus calls Simon, whom he later named Peter, Simon is greatly honored to have the invitation to be the fulltime student of a rabbi.

Simon knows who and what he is, that he’s a tradesman, that he’s no great scholar, that he’s got a quick temper. Simon Peter is a lot like today’s Joe six-pack, a guy with a GED, a job laying carpet, and whose life consists of family, the bowling league, and the annual pig-picking at the Mt. Olive Baptist Church. Lately Simon’s heard this famous rabbi teach at the local synagogue. He’s even had him over to the house to eat. Today, Jesus has made use of his boat to teach a group of people on the shore. And finally, Jesus directs him to deeper water and tells him to lower his nets – and the catch is fantastic, especially since they hadn’t caught anything all night. Suddenly, Peter snaps. Life is getting too weird. Peter knows that he’s just a simple fisherman, and this Jesus is way out of Simon’s league. It’s a bit scary and he begs Jesus to go away and leave him alone.

Instead, Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid. Fear not! Come be my student, my apprentice, my disciple.” And Simon Peter steps out in faith and trust and hope and follows Jesus. Now, I don’t know how you’ve heard the call of the disciples interpreted in the past. What I heard many a time was a great deal of emphasis on the sudden and total commitment of Peter and the others to be Jesus’ followers. They gave up everything - family, business, and home - to obey Jesus and go with him. And then I would notice that my faith wasn’t sudden, nor was my commitment total, because I still had my job, my family, and my home. Frankly, it sounded like a slow form of martyrdom - and I’d feel guilty because I was turning it down. The whole picture of the Christian life was one of giving up what gave you pleasure, because God wanted you to deny yourself. Give up dancing and movies and swimming and smoking and drinking and looking at pretty girls. In fact, it seemed like any form of beauty or pleasure was suspect. The good news was that after a life of toil, tears, suffering, and pain, you’d be rewarded in heaven for all of the misery that you’d endured as a Christian. Heaven sounded great, but the route to get there wasn’t very inviting.

Let me suggest another view. The disciples followed Jesus because they were offered a life of joy and contentment and love - not only in eternity, but in the present, as well. They were offered a life that was really life, a life worth living, a life with meaning. Jesus offered them relationship, a relationship of teacher and student, yes, but also a relationship of love. Jesus loved his disciples with the same love that he experienced from God the Father, and he told them to love one another, to abide in his love, so that they might have complete joy. (John 15:9-12)

Think for a moment about how Jesus kept talking about the kingdom of God. Sometimes he’d talk about searching for the kingdom of God, seeking it, wanting to live in God’s realm because it was

such a great prize. Sometimes he talked about how God's kingdom was very near. He wasn't saying, "You're going to die soon and go to heaven." Rather he was saying, "your way of living is putting you closer and closer to living as a citizen in God's own realm. And sometimes, Jesus said the kingdom of God is among you or within you. (Luke 17:21) The kingdom of God is a way of living, a place where our heart can dwell. It's a place where we live in relationship with God.

It's a way of living that Paul describes as "fullness of life," (Colossians 2:9) life that is wonderfully full, life that is fulfilling and deeply content. In fact, Paul waxes eloquent about the thrill of living in the kingdom God. He says that when we have righteousness and peace and joy, then we're in God's kingdom! (Romans 14:17) Paul draws this deep contrast between what life is like in the world in general, versus what life is like when we live in God's realm. Most people live lives characterized by "fornication, impurity, licentiousness,<sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions,<sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these." (Galatians 5:19-21) Most of the things on that list will make you miserable. The rest of the things on that list may offer momentary pleasure, but the long-term effects are miserable.

In stark contrast, Paul describes life in God's kingdom as filled with "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,<sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23) Which would you prefer, anger or peace, jealousy or faithfulness, quarrels or kindness? And did you notice how many of these things have to do with relationships?

Jesus calls us, each of us, to come and follow him. We're invited to come along on a journey, a journey of faith that leads us further and further into the kingdom of God. Part of the journey is a matter of learning, of studying, of being students of the Great Teacher. But Jesus also invites us into relationship, a relationship with him as our Lord and Savior, and also into a relationship with each other. You can't be a Christian all by yourself. Being a follower of Christ isn't all about you and your personal relationship with Jesus. Watching the evangelists on TV isn't worship and it isn't relationship. Jesus said we're to love one another as he loved us - and love is a relationship. Only when we are with other people can we experience patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and gentleness. The kingdom of God is a kingdom filled with people and the wonderful relationships we have with them.

I suspect that many people try to fill their lives with entertainment and wonder why they have an empty feeling, a vague discontent, an unsatisfied hunger that they can't quite describe. Let me give an extreme example. The new Dallas Cowboy stadium cost 1.2 billion dollars to build and it will hold 80,000 - 100,000 people. Most of the seats are much too far from the field to be able to see the details of the game so there are two high definition video screens that are 72 feet high and 180 feet long. So people spend about \$ 150 to go to the stadium to eat a hot dog and watch TV with 80,000 strangers. What's missing is relationship - and it's no wonder that while it may be entertainment, it can leave people with continuing loneliness and emptiness. Common everyday examples of our isolation include the amount of time we spend in our car by ourselves, the hours we spend staring at a flickering image on the TV at home, and the meals we eat where the conversation consists of three short exchanges - "Welcome to Wendy's. Please drive forward. Have a nice day."

Life can seem boring and meaningless and empty. But Jesus calls us to come and follow, to learn, to love, to serve, to relationship with him and each other. Jesus invites us to go on a journey on the path into the kingdom of God, a path that leads not only to righteousness, but also to relationship and joy!

*Take your stand and watch at the crossroads;*

*Inquire about the ancient paths;*

*Which was the path leading to good,*

*The Godly way?*

*Take that path, and walk in it,*

*And you will find rest for your soul.*

Jeremiah 6:16

Amen!

<sup>NRS</sup> **Matthew 4:18** 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. <sup>19</sup> And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." <sup>20</sup> Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Mark 1:16** As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea-- for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup> And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." <sup>18</sup> And immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>19</sup> As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. <sup>20</sup> Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Romans 10:14** But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?

<sup>NRS</sup> **John 15:9** As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup> "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Luke 17:21** nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."

<sup>RSV</sup> **Colossians 2:9** For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, <sup>10</sup> and you have come to fullness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Romans 14:17** For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Galatians 5:19** Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>22</sup> By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.