

## ***Jesus' Call to Follow Him***

Our New Testament reading is about the call of Jesus to his disciples to follow him. I read Mark 1:14-20:

*<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

*<sup>16</sup> 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.*

Often through the church's preaching, teaching and religious vocabulary, we layer over the clear words of Jesus with our own interpretations and traditions. When we hear "call" or "calling to discipleship" we're likely to associate these words with a vocational calling to ministry in the church or through missionary service. And indeed, there are special callings in the gospels and in the kingdom of God today. In our text, Jesus was calling the inner circle of his disciples, three of whom would become leaders in the earliest church after Jesus ascension back into heaven. But as Mark relates this call of Jesus, he intends for all of his readers to consider that God calls each of us to a lifetime of following, learning and apprenticeship in Kingdom living and serving.

Jesus called his first disciples and he calls us because he desires an everlasting love relationship with us. This is a wonder of his grace, that Jesus should want our love and fellowship, not only now but for all eternity (John 17:20-26). We need to realize the inestimable privilege, that Jesus invites us to follow and be with him forever. And Jesus' purpose was to call others to tell his saving message and be agents of his saving work even after his death, resurrection and ascension back into heaven.

Jesus spoke to these disciples with his ultimate authority as Lord of all. This was one of the striking aspects of Jesus' ministry. Although he came to us in all humility, lowliness and the unpretentiousness of a Galilean peasant, when Jesus spoke, his message resounded with authority. Those he addressed recognized something of God's authority in his voice and in his teaching which was lacking in the ostentatious pronouncements of the religious authorities (Mark 1:22; Matthew 7:29).

Jesus spoke with the authority of God because he was God incarnate, a claim that critical unbelievers could not accept or even tolerate. And with that divine authority, Jesus took the initiative in calling his disciples to abandon other competing commitments to follow him in absolute surrender and unqualified obedience. Jesus spoke like a commanding officer, and those who believed in him realized that to demur or even hesitate would be an act of high treason. Do we also hear the voice of the one who created all and is Lord over all and whose reign someday shall be acknowledged by all?

The criteria he used in calling these first disciples seemed almost indiscriminant. He didn't look for followers who had a theological education or even much formal training of any kind. Although the first disciples certainly were not ignoramuses or underachievers, they nevertheless were regarded by the religious elite as "ordinary men with no special training" (Acts 4:13).

In 1988, I was part of a group of four pastors from our city who were invited by a local TV station to travel to Israel to film a special on the life of Jesus. We were all given four or five speaking segments to be filmed in fitting locations. One of mine, since I was the Baptist in the group, was to speak about the baptism of Jesus as we stood on the mouth of the Jordan near Lake Galilee. As soon as we finished that film shoot, a boat-full of young fisherman arrived in their large wooden boat, not much different from those of Jesus' day, except for a small trolling motor. These young men were excited about an obviously successful catch of fish, as they tossed their catch into the back of a pick-up truck and drove away. As I saw their youthful vigor, heard their laughter, likely sprinkled with a few choice words, I thought, "These guys are like the young men Jesus called." Jesus sought after the ordinary so that, in the words of the Apostle Paul, he would thereby show the world that the extraordinary power of the kingdom is from God and not from human ability (1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5).

Jesus had already introduced himself to these disciples, and it's possible that they'd been with him for as long as a year, watching him minister and hearing him teach (John 1:35-51). Yet now was the time for them to draw nearer in a closer love-relationship of total commitment to him. To follow Jesus would demand they now accept responsibility in sharing his mission and prepare to continue his work..

I pray that I'm resolved to know Jesus in a closer love and trust relationship, hopefully drawing nearer to the aspiration of the apostle Paul, who said that his desire was to know Christ in a deeper, more satisfying and life-changing relationship. But the longer I live and observe the lives of those who yearn to know Christ in a deeper way, I realize what a costly objective this is. Paul linked his expression of desire in knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection with the necessity of "the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" and "becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10).

To follow Jesus, to walk in his steps, means to take up our cross daily, which is the cruciform life of saying "no" to self-centered, self-directed lives and a willingness to share in Jesus' reproach, rejection and suffering (Luke 9:23 & 1 Peter 2.21). The more we live conscious of his presence the more of his character becomes our character, his virtues our virtues. As we abide in him as a branch abides in the vine, the more fruit of the Spirit flows from our lives (John 15:1ff; Galatians 5:22f). And, in order to draw us closer to his loving presence, our heavenly Father may give Satan a longer tether (Job 1:6ff) in order to test, refine and strengthen us in him (Hebrews 12:4ff). He may allow some of our cherished and even godly dreams to be shattered to draw us yet closer to his love (Crabb).

To follow Jesus means not only that we live in communion with him but also that we are in close fellowship with his people. As these disciples, later to be joined by eight others, were called together as well as to follow Jesus, so are we called into a local

fellowship, the church of Jesus, the Body of Christ on earth. We cannot be his followers without being drawn to and even mutually dependent on each other.

Fishing was a joint venture, a team effort, and Jesus told these disciples that he would send them out to fish for people just as they'd been fishing for fish for their livelihood (19). To fish for others was a metaphor that spoke clearly to these fishermen and not so vividly for us. These men knew all about the work of fishing, and that it required hard work, persistence, courage, patience, skill, teamwork, alertness and faith, since they couldn't see the fish! Joining Jesus in his kingdom work as his missional people, of bringing others to faith that they become his worshipers, requires our absolute dependence on his divine power. And it requires that we join with God's people in this endeavor.

Fishing in Lake Galilee was and still is a team effort, throwing overboard a heavy net, weighted at the four corners with heavy weights, that allow the nets to descend over a large catch of fish that requires a mighty effort to bring again to the surface. So, don't think of fishing for men as being analogous to your sitting under a shade tree on a lazy riverbank, dangling your worm on a hook from your cane pole. We need each other and especially we need God's grace, strength, wisdom and protection.

And so for us as well, to be involved in kingdom work is to acknowledge that we can do nothing without the grace, power, wisdom and love of the Lord Jesus (John 15:5). And one thing that I have learned if nothing else—I am helpless and useless in the kingdom of God apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. And I know that the "sea" where we are called to fish, namely Madison and wherever God places us, requires his power, wisdom and anointing for a successful catch of "fish."

As one well-known African American preacher says in his colorfully way, Jesus has called us to be fishers of people, but we have instead settled for being keepers of an aquarium (EV Hill).

Jesus used this analogy of fishing for people because these first disciples were fishermen. But he would use different words for our following him. It's doing whatever will draw people to Jesus, involving the entire work and expression of the good news of Jesus, which includes his work of loving, caring, giving, and simple acts of kindness and mercy.

Jesus called these disciples to forsake their preoccupations and any other obstacles to following him unreservedly. For them it meant leaving behind the family business, which we can assume was successful. It also meant forsaking their partnership with their father and, we can assume, other family and community relationships. Probably for most of us following Jesus will not necessitate our changing occupations or even our address. But it will mean changing our preoccupation with self-centered objectives and making others the top priority of our lives.

We need to pause and think about the benefits of following Jesus. Just for starters we can say that the life of following Jesus is one of knowing and enjoying a soul-satisfying relationship with him. These four disciples, perhaps during their year of being with Jesus, had realized the joy of his presence and were willing to relinquish the lesser joys of a self-directed life without him. We shouldn't think of the life of

following Jesus as the throwing away of life but rather as the discovery of a purposeful life that only God can give us (John 10:10; Matthew 10:39)

How do we know if we're following Jesus? Only if we can say that Jesus is Lord over our relationships, our jobs, our finances, our family life, and our free time can we have assurance we're following him. The obedience of these disciples stands in marked contrast with the fickle crowd, who came only to be "blessed" by Jesus, as he mercifully fed them and preformed miracles before them. When Jesus began to talk with them about a costly life of commitment to a life-changing relationship, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." But Peter and the others who continued to follow him understood that a life of following Jesus was the only option for eternal life (John 6:66-69).

When Jesus called these fishermen to follow, they obeyed. The time comes when action is required. Even to delay is to disobey. The call of God will never come at a time of personal convenience to us, but will always seem to be a rude, even unwelcome interruption.

Look at the biblical examples, of Gideon, who was called while busily threshing wheat (Judges 6:11ff); Elisha was occupied with plowing (1 Kings 19:19); Amos was taking care of his sheep and sycamore-fig trees (Amos 7:14) and Matthew was tending his tax collecting business (Matthew 9:9). They also received "no polite, reasoned invitation" but instead were issued an "unconditional, unexplained demand" (Turner).

Although we must count the cost, we can't know all the details or answer all the questions about what following Jesus will demand. And we know we'll never "feel ready," or that the time is right. There are too many details, attachments and complexities in our lives to wait for the "right time." The cost we are to count is the quality of our faith and strength of our commitment to follow Jesus. Will that last through the fiery battles and times of intense disappointment and loneliness? But to have all the details answered, everyone else satisfied with our decision—these are things that cannot wait but must rather be severed from our hearts as distractions and obstacles to ready obedience.

Jesus' calling had no time limit. When Jesus calls us to follow he doesn't negotiate for our retirement date and pension account. For these four, following Jesus involved a lifetime of obedience, service, suffering, exile and martyrdom. They followed Jesus to the end and since the end of their mortal pilgrimage have been enjoying the presence of Jesus and the fullness of the joy of paradise. How sadly mistaken are those who say they've put in their allotment of time in serving the Lord and now it's time for someone else to take over their service or ministry! Since when does anyone of us ever follow or serve Jesus enough?

I read with interest an interview of Judi Dench, successful and highly acclaimed actress. Some of you sophisticates might recognize her as a Shakespearean actress, and others of us as James Bond's boss. Dame Dench, well into in her 70's, and suffering from macular degeneration, is nevertheless in great demand for theatre and cinema roles. Asked by the interviewer if she was considering retiring, she replied, "No, no, no! I wouldn't. If you're in the minority of people who really want to

do the work they're doing and you're lucky enough to be given a chance to do it then why stop? The whole discipline of learning is terribly good for us," she continued. "...I'm learning every single day." Citing her opportunities to work under new directors, she said, It's a learning curve all of the time. I think that's very, very good for you and very important; it's like everlasting school in a way."

You and I are privileged to follow Jesus and learn from him and use our gifts with him in the everlasting school of the Kingdom. We too should say "No, no, no!" to the thought of retiring from the school of following Jesus. What does it mean for you to follow him, today?