

Follow Love

Gospel of Matthew 4:12-23

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Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-- the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 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. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Gospel of Matthew 4:12-23, NRSV

And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

"On a quiet Sunday morning in June, as worshipers settled into the pews at Allen Baptist Church in southwestern Michigan, Pastor John Burrick grabbed his cell phone and dialed 911.....Half an hour later, 71-year-old Karolyn Caskey, a church member for nearly 50 years who had taught Sunday school and regularly donated 10% of her pension, was led out by a state trooper and a county sheriff's officer. One held her purse and Bible. The other put her in handcuffs. The charge was trespassing....Several months earlier, when she had questioned [her pastor's authority], he charged her with 'spreading a spirit of cancer and discord' and expelled her from the congregation."¹ This was the lead story on the front page of the Weekend section of last Friday's Wall Street Journal. It reported what seems to me to be an astonishing, yet apparently, growing movement among some conservative Protestant pastors (the journal estimates 10% to 15%, or 14k to 21k conservative evangelical churches nationwide) to bring back a certain brand of church "discipline"....a word on the same branch from the same root as the word disciple. Church leaders say that this "discipline" is intended to "restore churches to their traditional roles as moral enforcers." And so some are requiring their members to sign pledges that they will submit to the "care and correction" of their church elders. And on an increasingly widespread scale, members are being castigated, shunned and excommunicated for an array of familiar human transgression such as disharmonious behavior, gossip, slander, adultery, sexual impropriety, and the list

¹ Weekend Journal section of the Wall Street Journal, Friday, January 18, 2008.

continues. Church leaders say that “contemporary churches have grown soft on sinners,” concentrating on messages of self-affirmation and personal prosperity rather than focusing on sin and redemption. And so these Christian churches, thousands of them, are making a concerted effort to return their faithful flocks to what they say are the roots of Christian discipleship.

But I am wondering, when they say that they want to restore church discipline (i.e. discipleship) and the “traditional” role of the church as moral enforcer, which tradition are they following? Which tradition of discipleship is grounded in moral enforcement? Which disciples were shunned for their sins?

Because this morning’s Gospel offers a very different set of standards for Christian discipleship. As we heard in this morning’s Gospel, which is the benchmark for Christian discipleship, there is no moral requirement of the fishermen who are seemingly randomly asked simply to drop their nets and follow the itinerant stranger who beckons. Jesus did not round up those who were most willing to repent. He did not inquire about levels of immorality or patterns of persistent sin. He did not ask a single question or require a signature on a single oath or vow, or even a statement of good and pure intentions. In fact, based on this morning’s Gospel, the Craig’s List ad for disciples might have read:

Wanted: Twelve faithful hearts. No experience necessary. No education required. No skills or qualifications or moral purity needed. No oaths. No vows. No references checked. No sinners excluded. The only criteria: Must be available to begin immediately...not in two weeks, not in one week, not tomorrow, not by midnight tonight.....immediately. Right this very moment.

This morning’s reading shows us where the apostolic rubber meets the road, as it were. It holds out the yardstick against which we measure our own faith and the integrity of our commitment, our own worthiness as followers of Christ. Are we willing to drop everything for a journey to an undisclosed destination led by an unknown prophet?

But here’s a bit of the rub. We have a leg up on the fishermen in this morning’s Gospel. Because unlike Simon and Andrew and James and John, we know the whole story. We know that this stranger is the son of God. We know that Jesus was heralded by the ministry of John the Baptist, we know that Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by the holy spirit, and we know that Jesus was assisted in the wilderness by the angels of the Lord. It says so in the previous 14 verses of this very Gospel. But the four fellows who laid down their nets and followed did not know. They had no idea who this wandering wonder was. And yet, **they** followed.

And so we are challenged, each one of us who read this Gospel with faith and integrity, would we answer this call? Could we do it? Do we have the faith and the courage to follow God's call on a moment's notice?

I don't think that these fishermen followed because they were so much better than we are. They were no more qualified or justified than are we. They were not the crème de la crème of the faithful crop. They were not even Christians. They were fishermen. They did not follow because they were particularly good, or moral, or faithful or righteous....there is no mention of any of these things in this passage, or anywhere in the Bible, with regard to them, for that matter. And they did not follow because they recognized Jesus, per say. They had no idea who he was.

I don't think this is a story is about four faithful fishermen who were the model to which we should aspire, however short of their supreme sacrifices we might fall. I don't think it's a story about how human beings can turn our lives to God if we only have the strength and the courage.....it is not a story about the power and capability of human beings at all.....**it is a story about the power and capacity of God**a story about the way God works in us and in the world. For these fishermen had no reason to drop their lives and follow Jesus....no reason except the spirit of God that swept in and created an unquestionable faith where none had existed.....This is a story about the power of God's grace. About the way God creates disciples of Christ from fishers of cod in the blink of an eye. Immediately. About the power of falling in love with Jesus. For that is the only thing, as far as I can see, that could or would motivate four perfectly fine fishermen to lay down their nets on the very spot and follow a man they did not know down a road they could not imagine without a single question or qualm or carrot

This, my friends, is the mother of all love stories. For what else could or would inspire such a sacrifice? Who would leave their lives, their families, their futures, immediately, for anything short of true love? The kind of love that makes us drop whatever we were doing and follow. The kind of love that relegates all of our "business as usual" to the back burner. The kind of love that trivializes everything that we are doing for ourselves and elevates what we are able to do for one another to the apex of our imaginations and desires. The kind of love that changes our priorities from our own nets and the fish that will be ours, to the trajectory of God's mission...to God's call to us to train our nets on the lives and needs of our fellow human beings.

I have seen this sort of love on personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels up close and personal in this congregation. On a personal level, this wonderful parish is full of parents and grandparents who have put down their nets to welcome the gift and the significant responsibility

of children into their hearts and homes and lives, and soldiers on many fronts who have put down their nets and left their families and homes to serve God and their country at substantial personal sacrifice, and many others who have answered the call to change their personal direction and tend God's journey, on a moment's notice. On an interpersonal level I have seen this sort of love in spades in the many families who have dropped their nets to go and tend and care for loved ones who are in dire need. Parents and children and siblings and friends who have drooped everything to answer God's call for mercy and compassion and love. On an institutional level I have seen this sort of love in the shepherding of our lower level project. Dozens of faithful souls who have dropped their nets to raise the money, oversee the construction, and bless the use of this great gift of and to our community. And on a cultural level I have seen this sort of love in the effort to secure equal marriage that was brought to fruition this past June 14th with a decisive vote by our State legislature to honor and value all of God's children in this great state with the opportunity to marry. The support of this parish, the courage and diligence of the Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry and its coalition partners, and the signatures of over 1000 clergy representing dozens of faith traditions provided for the amazing realization of God's justice love in our midst.

This is what this morning's passage, and the model for church discipline, discipleship, is all about. But it is not a yardstick for our own faithfulness, for that faithfulness is not always within our conscious reach. So it is rather, I think, an epiphany of hope....a reminder that God not only works in mysterious ways, but in powerful life changing ways as well. **A reminder that God's call is always accompanied by God's grace.** The grace that has compelled countless disciples and apostles through the ages to abandon their personal catch of the day for nothing less than the struggle for wholesale peace and justice and compassion for all human beings. The kind of grace to which our hearts must stay open if we are to be ready to respond to God's call, immediately; if we are to take our personal places in God's divine love story.

Each of us is already or may soon be called to follow a Spirit that we do not fully understand, down a road we have never traveled, toward an end that we cannot begin to imagine. And we will be called to do it immediately. Without warning. Without preparation. Without any of the comforts of home, wherever or whatever that means for us.

And so I say to us all, let us go forth in peace and joy to put our nets to God's use. Whatever the cost. Wherever the journey takes us. Without fret or fear. For as we know in our hearts, **God's call is always accompanied by God's grace.**

Amen.

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