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Matthew 4:18-23

## IT'S ALL ABOUT FOLLOWING

The story of the call of Simon, his brother Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee, James and John is a story that wants to slip past us unnoticed. It sounds like nothing more than preliminaries, the necessary and rather pedestrian task of choosing the players before the game starts. Which, like going over the rules, and tossing the coin all come *before* what really matters – which is the game itself.

Besides, we all read the Bible from over the shoulder of Jesus (without even realizing it). Of course those fishermen dropped everything and followed him – after all, it's Jesus we are talking about here. And if Jesus asked us to do anything, we do it, of course (well, except sell everything we have, give the money to the poor and follow him, but that's another sermon).

One of the things that I try to do when I read scripture, not just on my own behalf, but on yours, is to move the camera around, to put it in a new place and try to look at the story from another angle.

When I first heard this story in Sunday School, it was what we used to call a “no brainer.” Of course they followed him, because after all they were lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. Oh how I wish I had been a fishermen in those days, just waiting for Jesus to come along and recruit me as a disciple. One minute these guys are nobodies, the next minute they are disciples. In an instant they went from working stiffs to men whose names we would remember forever, and whose devotion would be remembered for all time.

It never occurred to me as a child that they might have said “no.” Or even that unless that possibility really existed, saying “yes” means nothing. But come to think of it, there are lots of

reasons why they might have said no. First of all, these are the working poor, doing one of the hardest day labor jobs of all time — fishing for a living — which is entirely different than fishing for pleasure. As a kid I fished a lot for pleasure, but never once fished to eat.

Four said yes, but at least one said no. We forget that even if he didn't say anything he said no by staying behind, by not dropping his nets. His name was Zebedee, the founder and CEO of Zebedee and Sons Fishing Company of Capernaum. Nobody ever preaches from this text from the point of view of Zebedee. The one who gets left behind, the one whose sons abandon him in an instant to follow an itinerant rabbi whose mental health some will shortly question when his family goes out to “restrain him for some were saying ‘he has gone out of his mind.’” This was a family business and the two youngest and strongest employees (probably the only ones) have just quit. Isn't that special? A father's dream for his sons — to leave honest work and become part of a wandering band of spiritual gypsies? How is he supposed to make it on his own? Jesus just put him out of business.

For years he had struggled to get his sons in up the morning, to mend nets and sometimes to fish all night. This is what sons do to honor their father and put bread on the table. Then along comes a Galilean sage who doesn't seem to have a real job himself, calls from the shore, and “immediately” the nets drop on the spot and they walk away. They do not say goodbye. They do not make a plan to replace themselves with temporary workers until they get this disciple thing out of their system. They just leave. And we think it's wonderful because we aren't Zebedee. These are not just extras about to star in a movie. These are sons leaving their father.

That's what I mean about camera angles, it all depends on your point of view. The church refers to this text as the “call of the disciples.” Zebedee might call it the day I went out of business, thank you Jesus. His conversations from that day on around the dinner table with Mrs. Zebedee might sound like this: “That was before the boys left, remember . . . that was when all still fished together. Have you heard from them, lately? Do you even know where they are?” As she says, “Don't raise your voice to me, I didn't leave.”

A second problem with this rather innocent sounding story is that some people hear it, and immediately begin to wonder if they have what it takes to be a disciple. Because what it sounds like is that this requires a kind of irrational urgency, a split-second decision where one turns in a new direction and never looks back. And so we wonder: could we do it? Could you do it?

Could you abandon your grocery cart in front of the frozen food case at the supermarket and set off for parts unknown without stopping to call home? That's more or less what these four men are reported to have done. Someone they don't even know says, “Follow me,” and they do so — leaving their families, their jobs, their homes in order to become something — what — a band

of wandering minstrels for the kingdom of God. It's every parent's dream.

When this happens today we say that so and so has been abducted into a cult, brainwashed, and no longer knows the difference between fantasy and reality. Some of you may be old enough to remember the "moonies" – the ones you would see in the airport before they tightened security. They sat, heads shaved, sometime drumming, always in robes, and a far-away look in their eyes. These were somebody's children, but this is no parent's dream. Following sounds good after the fact, but at the time it can feel like abandonment.

Today we would analyze them psychologically, looking for clues that they had a God-sized hole in their lives and were therefore susceptible to the promises of a charismatic stranger. We would pity them, hoping that they would eventually come to their senses before it was too late, or they were taken advantage of. So what's the difference between now and then? Well, our story is in the Bible, and our hero is Jesus. And when Jesus says come and follow me, we assume that any sane person would immediately say "yes." I think the power of the story is that it takes a slightly insane person to say "yes." A truly sane person would say "no."

One of my heroes just died and was remembered by a generation that is losing its heroes. Sergeant Shriver — the man who started the Peace Corp because President Kennedy called and he followed. Did you know that Shriver went to mass every morning, and when asked why he said, "I cannot do what I do without God in my life."

There is always a hierarchy of sacrifice of course — some walk away from it more than others. Take Simon and Andrew for example. Matthew makes no mention of a boat, so we can assume that they were casting their nets from the shallows of the sea, and then sorted their catch on the beach by themselves. James and John walked away from much more: a boat. No small possession in those days, and they abandoned it along with their father.

But that's not all. There is something very unusual about this scene in its first century context. In those days, Rabbis did not recruit their students; students sought them out. It was the custom for a teacher of wisdom to wait for people to come to him and then he interviewed them carefully before deciding whether or not to take them on as disciples. Only the promising students were allowed to stay on, the ones who showed real promise and devotion.

No self-respecting rabbi would ever have gone out to recruit his own followers, and if he had, he would not have picked the first four people he laid eyes on. By doing so, Jesus sets himself apart from all the other teachers of his time.

But not even this is the strangest thing. The strangest thing is that they followed him – went

along with him. He called and they followed, for which we tend to give them all the credit. What strength, what courage, what faith those four must have had to do what they did, sacrificing everything to go after him. What heroes they were, we say. And that's how we let ourselves off the hook.

Because according to Matthew, there was nothing hard about it at all. He recorded it as a miracle story, part of what God can do if God chooses. No angst, no torn hearts, no backward glances. It was not as if they really decided something, because I don't think they were even what you would call "religious" types. It was more like something that happened to them.

"Follow me," Jesus said, and immediately they left their nets and followed him. I don't think this is a story of remarkable men, but of the remarkable power of God to change the lives of unremarkable people. To sneak up on them and claim them in the blink of an eye. In the Bible, God is always sneaking up on ordinary people.

Not so long ago, in a town called Montgomery, Alabama, a woman named Rosa Parks, who would never have considered herself a disciple, suddenly found the courage, not to stand up but to stay seated, and the civil rights movement was born. She claims she was just tired and didn't want to take it anymore. OK, apparently God can work with tired feet. Martin Luther King Jr., did not set out to be the voice of the civil rights movement. He came to it reluctantly. But God said, "I've give you that voice, and nobody else has a voice like that, so what are you going to do with it?" Follow me.

As long as we continue to believe that ordinary people are not the ones that God sneaks up on, then of course we will leave the work of the kingdom to so-called "extraordinary" people – and the truth is, we don't know who they are, and neither do they. Or if they do know, if they think of themselves as extraordinary, as "chosen" then you get a whole different set of problems.

Do you think that Lech Walesa got up one day, had a particularly good bowl of cereal, and decided to lead the Solidarity movement in Poland, to throw a stone against the glass house that was Soviet tyranny? Do you think that Nelson Mandela had his life planned out the way that it went? Let's see, 20 years in prison, and then get elected president?

Or take Albert Schweitzer, the greatest Christian in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in my opinion, who was so unorthodox in his beliefs that he would have been pronounced a heretic, who walked away from every good gift the world can offer, German high society, a doctorate in music, in theology and in philosophy, life tenure in one of the best universities in Europe, but something was missing. At age 30 he went back to school and became a doctor of medicine so he could walk away from everything the world treasures and build a jungle clinic to bring healing to people

who were considered the most backward and insignificant inhabitants on the planet. At night, after a long day of surgeries, he would play Bach, Mendelssohn, Franck and Reger on a special instrument provided to him by the Paris Bach Society, and his sleeping patients, not to mention a jungle alive with animals, would hear classical music floating over the trees beside rivers teeming with crocodiles. After hours, Schweitzer wrote a book on the philosophy of human culture, one on the mysticism of Paul, and of course, the definitive work on the historical Jesus, a book whose incomparable final lines are included in your bulletin this morning.

What was he doing? He was following. He believed that there was no other way to know Jesus, or to be intoxicated by God. Perhaps we over-analyze this to our detriment. We speak of certain people as having a “calling.” That is, someone, or something “called,” and they answered that call, and now they can no more turn and go back than could Simon, Andrew, James, and John pick up their nets and say, “No thanks, we have reconsidered.”

When people spoke of Jesus as being possessed by demons, and there are several such references to this in the Bible, I think it was a natural response to what seemed inexplicable. In a sense, all deeply spiritual people seemed possessed because they have so completely gotten themselves out of the way. Ask a musician to explain her talent, she will always step aside. “The music comes through me,” she says “I am merely a vessel, a channel.” God assures his prophets, like Jeremiah, that the words will be provided, and so he is not too worry about his vocabulary. All art is the mediation of transcendence through imperfect vessels. Something More calls, and we follow, and through us people see beauty and truth, and it’s contagious. That’s why the arts are the *last* thing we should cut from our school budgets. How else will our students know what it means to be human?

The disciples were not brilliant, not righteous, and not born to the blood of kings. The disciples fell in love with something more than what they *were* when confronted with the possibility of what they *might* become. And this man, this Jesus man, must have been able to look at you and make you believe that anything is possible because you are a Child of God.

If we spend all our time waiting for the big break, the perfect relationship, the best seller, our 15 seconds of fame, we will miss out on what might happen if we simply decided to follow. Follow Jesus instead of worshipping Christ. Allow ourselves to be used for some purpose greater than “What shall we eat? What shall we wear? And where shall we go tonight?”

Fred Craddock told this story once. “I was out walking one day and came across a nine-pound sparrow walking down the street in front of my house.”

I asked the sparrow, “Aren’t you a little heavy?”

The sparrow said, “Yeah, that’s why I’m out walking, trying to get some of this weight off.”

And so I said, “Why don’t you fly?”

The sparrow looked at me as if I was an idiot and said, “Fly? I’ve never flown. I could get hurt!”

I said, “What your name?”

And the sparrow said, “Church.”

Sometimes “business as usual” is unacceptable, and waiting to think it over is not a good idea. If and when God calls, we should not decide whether to follow based on whether we think we are up to the task, but whether we can afford to pretend that someone else will do it if we don’t.

*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.*

The rest is history, they like to say. But I don’t think so. I don’t think its history at all. I think we spend our lives at the edge of the lake, wondering if that was God we heard calling, or if that was just thunder.

The time is coming, and soon, when we won’t have the luxury of figuring out which it is for certain. We’d best drop out nets and follow. And if someone wants to know where we are going, we’ll tell them. We’ll tell them we’re going . .

Home.

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, January 23, 2011

Lord of Life, we ask only that you make Your presence known in this hour, that You will help us to know why it is that we came here, why it is better for us to be here than not be here. Our lives are busy and full of obligations. And it can seem foolish to add one more thing on Sunday morning, an hour of worship and song, of challenge and meditation. We've got things to do. We've got a list. But then, we are not our schedule, are we? We are not our list of our accomplishments, are we? We are Your own creation. Made in Your own image. And that means that what You mean for us to do is more important than what we mean for us to do. Call us out of our routines this morning, out of our endless striving and into the adventure that is faith. And take away from us our fears about whether we are up to the task. You believe in us. That should be very reassuring. Amen.



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