

January 22, 2017: The Great Invitation: Follow Me



Today we move into the third week of our worship series, "The Great Invitation." We began by talking about baptism, first Jesus' and then ours... how our baptisms extend from the moment of sprinkling into a vocational call that is lived out our whole lives long. Last week, we overheard John the Baptist testifying to others about who Jesus was, and we saw how Jesus called those seeking after him to "Come and See", to experience for themselves the journey of discipleship. Today we'll talk more about the call and response to a life of following after Jesus, and move on in the coming weeks to Jesus' teachings on the mountainside and to Pharisees of his day. It is my hope that this series reminds you of your call to follow, and of the basic convictions of our faith that impact how we live and serve with others.

Now, we're jumping around in our gospels a little bit, and that can be confusing – since the stories don't always line up exactly. For example, last week from the Gospel of John, we heard how Andrew had been following John the Baptist and after responding to Jesus' invitation to "come and see", he sought out his brother, who we come to know as Simon Peter, to come and meet Jesus too. We never heard a word about what Andrew and Simon Peter do for a living, we simply learn of their encounter with Jesus. In today's reading from Matthew, we meet Andrew and Simon Peter again, for the first time in this gospel account, and we learn that they're fishermen. Jesus seeks them out and simply says, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." Without delay – or at least none that we the readers, are privy to, they immediately get out of their boat and follow... And a similar thing happens when Jesus approaches another set of fishermen brothers, James and John, sons of Zebedee. As they are mending their nets, Jesus calls, "Follow Me!", and we hear the same immediacy of their response – they drop their nets and leave their father in the boat to follow Jesus. Since the Gospels were originally written as separate and complete religious texts (in and of themselves), not meant to be read in concert with one another, it's impossible to say which "first encounter" with Jesus was the accurate one – Andrew inviting Simon Peter to come and meet Jesus, or Jesus calling the two brothers from out of their fishing boat. I think there is some "truth" to learn from each of them, whether or not they are factual.

According to Matthew, there was no hesitation, no pause or request for some time to talk it over with their families, their boss, their friends... no, they followed IMMEDIATELY. How many of us would have such an unquestioning and uninhibited response to follow Christ? How many of us would, without a backward glance, leave everything we know behind to follow a complete stranger, one who claims, "I will make you fishers of men." Wow... well, great, cause that's what I've always wanted! I can imagine your response to their immediate and complete dedication is similar to mine, a bit shocking to the system... a bit radical... possibly, a bit unbelievable.

On the other hand, we can't read the New Testament without seeing that some followed in a radical way. Jesus said, "Follow me," to a tax collector named Matthew; and he got up and followed him. Philip, who was from Andrew and Peter's hometown, followed his

calling by helping Jesus to feed the five thousand. John reports that Jesus said, "Follow me," and Nathaniel, also known as Bartholomew, followed. According to church tradition, Bartholomew followed the call by carrying the Gospel to various countries, including India. Thomas, having been called, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Every now and then, someone does respond in a radical and unexpected way. Renowned preacher, Dr. Fred Craddock tells the story of a medical student who heard the call and made a radical life change. A young woman came to him after hearing his sermon on today's text. She had decided to leave medical school and go to work among migrant workers in the Rio Grande Valley. Her parents were, understandably, furious with the new direction her life had taken. Like those fishermen, however, she heard the call and she stayed with it.

And there have been others. We've heard before about Francis of Assisi. How he turned from a life of luxury to one of voluntary poverty with the intention of sharing his possessions with the poor.

Likewise, Elizabeth Gurney Fry (in the early 1800's) exemplified an emphasis on living by Jesus' example. In addition to raising a large family, this wife of a wealthy London merchant single-handedly initiated, and caused the implementation of, efforts to reform the prison system in England. These reforms spread throughout the continent even during her lifetime.

Just a few years later in the United States, Dorothea Lynde Dix spearheaded the movement for the establishment of hospitals for the mentally ill, who were, at the time, being held in prisons. In these people and in many others, we see an example of individuals "leaving their nets" to follow. Making drastic life changes, and impacting the world around them for the good of all.

What does this mean for us? If others have heard the call and have responded in such radical ways, then shouldn't we all do the same? Should we quit our jobs to go preach and teach about Jesus in the far reaches of the world? Should we be leaving everything else behind to be in ministry with the poor and disenfranchised? I cannot answer that question for you. It has to be answered by each of us as we experience God's call in our lives. How one hears the call and responds to it is a matter of personal decision.

However, there is an inescapable truth in the story of Jesus' call to the fishermen and their response. The truth is that who we worship can and will make a claim on all of our lives. It is impossible to worship the God of Jesus Christ and not have that God expect more of us than we are often ready to give. Whether or not we respond to the call, the call of Christ is always unsettling. Hearing it is always disturbing. It disrupts our lives and pulls us in new directions. It challenges us to stand us for love, for justice, for the weak and downtrodden – to speak truth to power, even when it's uncomfortable.

Over the past few days, we have watched as people throughout our nation, and throughout the world have joined their voices, through rallies and marches, protests and gatherings, to stand together for inclusivity and equal rights for all (women, immigrants,

people of color, the LGBTQ community, people of different faiths, and more), to voice their concerns about the care of and compassion for our neighbors (both near and far), and for climate justice and care for the earth. Whether you were happy about the inauguration on Friday as our nation swore in our 45th president, or you were fearful about the impacts that this new administration's leadership may have on our world, the issues that dominated the airwaves yesterday at rallies worldwide are ones that we can all get behind as followers of Christ. I was asked to speak at the rally here in Red Bank, hosted by a new group called the Greater Red Bank Women's Initiative – and you know what, I was the only pastor who accepted this invitation. So I spoke not only of climate justice (which was the topic assigned to me) but of the convictions of our faith, in particular, this faith community. I said that through our faith tradition, we recognize and celebrate that we are all Beloved Children of God, no matter what labels and definitions we come up with to divide us... we are all equally blessed with love to give and to receive, and responsibility to care for each other and this world that we've been blessed to live in. My friends, these are convictions of our faith... they've been made into political statements because of the fears people hold that these basic and faith-based values will not be upheld during this political season.

I spoke of the values we all should share – regardless of faith, ethnic, or political background: basic human decency... treating one another the way we wish to be treated; equality and the celebration of the diversity of life... recognizing that our differences make us stronger and wiser; and care for the earth... because we only have this one planet to live on, this one home that we pass on to future generations.

Jesus came to bring light to those who had sat in darkness. Part of that darkness was political oppression, as our scripture from Isaiah referred to the darkness caused by the Assyrian domination of the Israelites. Now, it was the Romans doing the oppressing. Part of that darkness was hopelessness. Part of that darkness was illness. Part of that darkness was spiritual depression and anguish. Jesus came to bring light into the darkness. To bring hope to the hopeless, and God's love to all. For Matthew, being part of that ministry was worth letting go of our fishing nets and leaving our old lives behind.

The question that resonates in my heart and mind today is what will this look like for us? What does it look like for US to accept the call that Jesus places on our hearts, to respond with immediacy and excitement? I hope and pray that this following – this dedication to the principles we hold dear does not end simply with participation in one single event, one rally or march, one single action – but rather, a lifetime of action, a daily living out of the convictions that Christ calls us to, so that our lives might reflect our call to follow, in little ways and in big ways. May it be so. Amen.