

Calling, Following, Making

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.

There are many choices we make throughout our lives. The choices we make – about what we believe and how we will act, about where we will live and whom we will love and what we will do for a living – they are all very important. Sometimes we may be making decisions that feel more like a calling. And we are not sure how to decide and we seek guidance – we pray, we talk to trusted friends. Let's first take a step back before we make decisions.

One of life's lessons from I believe from biblical wisdom is that life is a gift and a task. And that gift is a deepening sense we belong to God, the Source of Love, Divine Mystery. The Holy is in us and around us always. This gift is not really a choice. But too often the message from the church or Christianity has been – by our good decisions and good deeds, we will earn God's favor. If we will just work hard enough, if we pray enough and help enough and give enough, then God will claim us in the end and give us an eternal reward.

This is a form of idolatry, and it is peculiarly American. We have so many choices and because we have often heard the adage that God helps those who help themselves. What we may have lost along the way is a full sense of the power and presence of the Holy One who invites people who have made terrible choices, reveals a light when people feel stuck in the shadows,

surprises people with grace and beauty and joy in ordinary moments. Being a follower of the teachings of Jesus is one way for all people to be open to a different way of being present.

Let's look at our passage from Matthew. This may be a familiar Bible story to you or maybe not. Sometimes when people hear it, they worry about whether they would have dropped their nets, their life, and committed to following Jesus. They worry about whether they have what it takes to be a disciple. Could you do it? If a clear call came tomorrow, would you get up from your chair or sofa, walk out the door without taking your keys or your phone or turning off the lights? That is more or less what this passage describes of the first four disciples. Someone they had never seen before said, "Follow me" and they did.

It is not the way such things were done in those days. Rabbis did not seek students; students sought them. Teachers waited for people to come to them and they interviewed them carefully before deciding whether or not to take them on as disciples. Only the most promising students were allowed to stay on, the ones who showed a real aptitude for theology. 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 just that, Jesus set himself apart from the other teachers of his time. He was unique as he walked among ordinary working people and chose them to be his friends.

But that is not the strangest thing. The strangest thing is that they went along with him. Not one or two of them, but all of them. He called and they followed. We tend to give them credit. What strength, what courage, what faith they must have had. Matthew and Mark use the word that they "immediately" left their lives as fishermen and followed him. Amazing. Inspiring.

I like what Barbara Brown Taylor says about this story. She writes, "If you ask me, this is not a hero story, but a miracle story, as full of God's power as the feeding of the five thousand or raising of Lazarus from the dead." (Taylor, page 39)

Think about some of the miracle stories in the gospels and listen to the language. "Be made clean," Jesus says to the leper and immediately he was made clean (Mark 1:41). "Stand up, take your mat and go to your home," he said the paralyzed man, and the man stood up and immediately took his mat and went home. (Mark 2:11). "Follow me," Jesus said, and immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Can you hear it? This is no story about the power of human beings to change their lives. This is a story about the power and presence of the Holy, Source of love and light, Creator of the Cosmos, Universal Christ – to walk right up to a quartet of fishermen and work a miracle, inviting them to be disciples.

This is not so much a story about people. This is a story about God - Mother, Father, Holy Mystery, Spirit. Taylor writes. "It is a story about God, and about God's ability not only to call us but also to create us as people who are able to follow — able to follow because we cannot take our eyes off the one who calls us, because he interests us more than anything else in our lives, because he seems to know what we hunger for and because he seems to be food."

As Brown puts it, those ordinary fishermen allowed themselves to fall in love. Their hearts did not cleave to what was falling from their hands as they dropped their nets, but to what they were reaching out to find, and in that Holy-drenched moment of their turning to follow, the miracle occurred: their lives flowed in the same direction of the Spirit. The kin-dom came and comes every time our lives are brought into that same flow, so that we too allow ourselves to fall in love and deepen our awareness of the Spirit in us and follow the teachings of Jesus.

Following can mean many things. We each have our own story. Sometimes following may mean staying at home. Sometimes following may mean casting the same old nets in a new way or for new reasons. It may mean doing something different with the fish you catch or spending the money they bring in in a different way. It may mean doing less every day, not more, so that there is time to watch how the light changes on the water.

And there is another piece of responding to the invitation that Jesus offers in this story that struck me this week. Debi Thomas, in her essay on this passage, writes about going to revival meetings growing up, how that shaped her faith and what changed.

When I was eleven years old, my childhood church held a series of "revival" meetings. Whether or not the minister intended it, what I took away from his sermons was that I couldn't serve Jesus properly unless I became someone fundamentally different from who I was. My bookish shyness and introversion would have to give way to charisma and flair. I'd have to say goodbye to the United States, and head to some far flung corner of the world I'd never heard of. I'd have to become a pro at face-to-face and door-to-door evangelism. I'd have to surrender my dreams of writing, and Become Useful.

In the version of discipleship I conjured up as a kid, my value in God's kingdom existed in inverse proportion to my innate loves, interests, desires, and hopes. The only authentic way to follow Jesus was to somehow become *not* me.

But years later Thomas heard something different in the Jesus' words, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." She wrote - Jesus did not invite them to abandon who they were; he invited them to become their most authentic, God-ordained selves. He invited them to live into the fullness of the *Imago Dei* they were born with.

Jesus's invitation to his first disciples was specific and particular, rooted in the language, culture, and vocation they knew best. What metaphor would make more sense to four

fishermen than the metaphor of fishing for people? Simon and Andrew would have understood the nuances of that metaphor in ways I never will. James and John knew from years of hard won experience what depths of patience, resilience, intuition, and artistry professional fishing require. These men knew the tools of the trade, the limitations of their bodies and the potential dangers those limitations posed, and the life-and-death importance of timing, humility, and discretion.

Most of all, they knew the water. They knew how to respect it, how to listen to it, and how to bring forth its best in due time. When Jesus called these tried-and-true fishermen to follow him, they understood the call not a directive to leave their experience and intelligence behind, but to bring the best of their core selves — to become even more fully and freely themselves.

So if we're going to follow Jesus at all, we'll have to do it in the unique particulars of the lives, communities, cultures, families, and vocations we find ourselves in. We'll have to trust that God prizes our intellects, our memories, our backgrounds, our educations, our skills, and that the Holy One will multiply, shape, and bring to fruition everything we offer up to him in faith from the daily stuff of our lives. ***"I will make you,"*** he tells the fishermen. I will take cultivate, deepen, magnify, purify, protect, and perfect the people God created you to be.

This deepening is about resurrection. It's about abundant and authentic *life*. When Jesus promises to "make us," it's a commitment to nurture us, not a threat to sever us from all we love. It's a promise rooted in gentleness and respect — not coercion. It's a promise that when we dare to let go, the things, the ego we relinquish might be returned to us anew, enlivened in ways we couldn't have imagined on our own.

Thomas wrote - What bothered me as a child — and bothers me still — about the fishing metaphor is that we so easily misinterpret it to mean that we have the power to "hook" or to "catch" others for God. We don't. We are not called to cajole, manipulate, trap, bully, or even persuade others join our religion. It is God alone who captures the imagination.

God alone who makes the vision of Divine kin-dom, the Beloved Community, come alive in a human soul. All we can do is embody the vision in the particulars of our lives, reflecting the profound beauty and love and hope of the Christ is. The rest is up to God. In the end, Jesus's invitation is *Gospel*, or "good news." If it's not good news, it's not God. If it's not *good news for all* — it's not God.

What does it mean for you to follow? What does it mean to respond to a call whose you're your name is Beloved? What is *your* Good News, and how will you share it in the turbulent waters of your particular time and place? ***"Follow me and I will make you."*** Amen.

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, (Cowley Publications: 1999), pages 37-41.

Debi Thomas, "I Will Make You," Journey with Jesus blog. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays>