

### Called to Discipleship

You can always count on the Gospel of John to tell the story differently than the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Last week we heard Matthew's story of the calling of the first disciples. This story may be more familiar to you. Simon Peter, his brother Andrew, as well as James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus said to them, "Follow me," and they left their nets and went with him. Luke expands the story—same characters, same location, same results—with Jesus doing a little "persuasive demonstration." He borrows a boat from the fishermen to put out into the water a short distance, and from there he teaches a crowd. Then he suggests to the fishermen that they should cast their nets into the deep water. And when they do, the catch is so great that it takes two boats to haul it in. After that, Peter, Andrew, James and John leave everything to follow Jesus.

And then there's the Gospel of John. Where the first disciples who are called are not at the Sea of Galilee. They are somewhere near the place on the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized. They are disciples of John, the Baptizer. One is Andrew, and a second person is unnamed. They are not fishing, and we aren't told how they make a living. But after his encounter with Jesus, Andrew tells his brother Simon, who gets the new name of Peter from Jesus right then and there. And then the next day, when Jesus does go to Galilee, although not to the Sea of Galilee, he recruits Philip and Nathanael.

Different people, a different place, and a somewhat different dialogue—the Gospel of John reminds us that the Bible is given to us not as an historical record book, but as a collection of faith stories. And this faith story reiterates the claim of the entire New Testament, that God's call in Jesus Christ is to a new life as a Christian. The eminent 20<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian Karl Barth asserts that in the New Testament the Greek word *klesis*, translated "calling," "always means quite unambiguously the divine calling," which "transplant[s] [a person] into a new state as a Christian." (In *Church Dogmatics III*, found in *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*, Wm. C. Placher, ed., 2005, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, p. 431) "Calling," or "vocation," in the New Testament has nothing to do with a person's daily job. It has everything to do with a person's relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Martin Luther called this our "spiritual calling," and John Calvin called it our "general calling." Like Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, and Nathanael, **we are called to follow Jesus.**

What does it mean to be "called?" The dialogue between the first two disciples and Jesus, as related to us by John, illuminates the nature of this call.

"What are you looking for?" asks Jesus.

"Rabbi, where are you staying?" Andrew and his friend answer a question with a question.

"Come and see."

The call is an invitation. It is personal. And it is compelling only because of who Jesus is. The Lamb of God, The Messiah. The one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote.

Some of us can recall a comparable moment in our lives, when the reality of Jesus opened us to a new life, a stunning turnabout, a change after which nothing else would ever be the same. Maybe it happened to you as a young person, at camp or in youth group. Or perhaps you had something you

might call a “born again” experience later in life. Some of us can name the date and place and the prayer we voiced welcoming Christ into our hearts. Others have equally valid faith stories in which becoming a Christ-follower was a gradual process, perhaps a living into a life taught and modeled by parents or grandparents or spouse or spiritual friend. And still others, in this room today, may be wondering whether taking a step toward discipleship is the choice for them. Is Jesus for real? Is his invitation for me? What this story shows us is a pattern of seeking which is answered by an invitation to “come and see.” Christ does not use force to make us follow him. He invites. He offers. He welcomes us to discover where he abides in the world, and to stay with him. His invitation is to fellowship, friendship, companionship, relationship. He never threatens or scares people into being his disciple. He invites.

And when we in freedom accept his invitation, we make a commitment to obey him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived in serious times, in Germany as the Nazis rose to power. So his 1937 book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, is a serious book. There is nothing in it designed to make it seem simple to be a Christian. It’s a costly commitment. He wrote, “When we are called to follow Christ, we are summoned to an exclusive attachment to his person. . . . Christ calls, the disciple follows; that is grace and commandment in one.” (Placher, *op. cit.*, p. 391) He also wrote, “Discipleship is not an offer man makes to Christ.” (Some of us have tried to make that kind of bargain. Hey Jesus, I’ll be your disciple if you’ll promise me eternal life! Or, Hey Jesus, I’ll be your disciple if it will improve my crummy life.) Rather, discipleship is a commitment of both faith and obedience. For, wrote Bonhoeffer, “only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.” (Placher, *op. cit.* p. 393)

The leap of faith is a leap of commitment and obedience. When you jump off a cliff, you are committed. You will either land on the other side, or plunge into the abyss. The choice of faith sets the course of one’s life. It is the call, answered by “Yes, Rabbi. Yes, Lord. I will come and see, and stay with you.”

But here’s the thing. The call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, this invitation to come and see and stay with him, in addition to being a commitment is a beautiful gift. When we accept the invitation, we begin a journey of transformation, an adventure which will take us places we never would have expected or chosen for ourselves. Imagine the surprises experienced, on the way with Jesus, by Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael. Water turned to wine, loaves of bread multiplied to feed thousands, blind people given their sight, tormented people set free! And along with these joys, they also felt their hearts broken by the suffering of others, their souls stretched by recognizing God in their midst, and their spirits crushed when Jesus was crucified by those in power. To be a disciple of Jesus is to enter fully into the life of the world. Which can be beautiful—and heart wrenching—at the same time.

But I’m with writer Rob Goff, who would have it no other way. When we make ourselves vulnerable, when we open our hearts to being broken, we open our hearts to God. And vice versa. Goff wrote a book called *Love Does* telling stories of his crazy, whimsical life and how it is always giving him new understandings of how God works in the world. We are reading it in the youth Sunday school class. Goff is kind of a “fantasy parent,” who lets his three kids do things which all “reasonable” parents would say are impractical or risky or just not doable. For instance, when each of his kids turned 10 years old, he promised them a 3-day adventure of their choosing. His daughter liked tea parties, so, without any planning at all, off they flew to London for high tea. Son #1 wanted to summit Half Dome in Yosemite, so he and Dad immediately did that despite a terrific snowstorm. Imagine scaling a mountain with a ten-year-old in a snowstorm. Son #3 wanted to ride a motorcycle in the desert. Off they went, and when the boy crashed on a sand dune, his first words when Dad got to him were, “That was awesome.”

Goff has also taken his children to India to liberate enslaved children. So it's not all fun and games. And while he doesn't exactly compare himself to God, he observes,

Even though Jesus' disciples were older, they must have felt like my kids did on their 10-year-old adventures. They saw joy and suffering, triumph and tragedy, and in the end there was just a man, an idea, and an invitation without a lot of details. The disciples were unschooled and ordinary like my kids, like all of us. Yet they didn't need all the details because they were on an adventure with a father who wanted to take them. You don't need to know everything when you're with someone you trust.

(Rob Goff, 2012, *Love Does*, Nelson Books, Nashville, p. 136)

Goff concludes, "I used to think knowing God was like going on a business trip with him, but now I know He's inviting me on an adventure instead." (p. 128)

The call of Christ is an invitation to an adventure we call discipleship. What are you looking for? Jesus says, "Come along, and see for yourself."

It's the most adventurous, stimulating, challenging, satisfying adventure ever offered to humankind. And we're all invited!