

“FOLLOWING JESUS: CALLED AND SENT”

Luke 5:1-11; 9:1-6; 10:1-12

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I really like Luke's Gospel. The way he tells the story just really speaks to me. He seems to understand my faith and more importantly the community in which my faith has developed. Consider for example the call of Peter from our first reading. It's totally different from Mark's version which has Jesus just happening on the brothers and telling them to follow him. And they do. They drop their nets, their business, and hang out with Jesus for the next few years. Who does that? It's not how most of us became disciples. Years of Sunday School, two years of confirmation, and a couple more years of church, reading the Bible on my own, and only then did I decide to "follow Jesus." I expect that for many of you, too, following Jesus was more a process than a single event.

John's version is not much better. First Andrew decides to follow Jesus based on the strong recommendation of John the Baptist and Peter follows based on Andrew's recommendation. Basically Peter's there because the references checked out.

But Luke seems to understand the dynamics of faith development. When Jesus tells Peter to put his boat out a little from shore so that he can teach the crowds, it's not the first time Peter had met him. After teaching at the synagogue some time before this, he stopped by Peter's house and healed his mother-in-law. So Peter has met Jesus before and in this story he listens to his teaching, and then there's the miraculous catch, and then Peter decides to follow at that point. Jesus issues no call. Peter just decides. Like I did, or maybe like you did. In Mark, it seems like Jesus' charisma compels him to follow. In general, discipleship is your choice. Some ministers like to tell their call story as a kind of compulsion. You know, "I tried to get out of it, but God just wouldn't let me go." It happens that way sometimes, but not for me. I'm doing this because I want to, and you're here this morning because you want to be.

We don't start out mature in our faith. We don't always know where Jesus is leading. We do a lot of listening and learning before we take the next step. And that's really how Luke describes it: people making up their own minds about Jesus and only then following on the way.

So not only do I like this way of coming to discipleship as Luke describes it, but I think the way he tells the story also speaks more directly to our life together. So I'm going to just lift a few things from these stories that are important to the faith community: No deep theological insights, no different way of seeing a biblical story, just some practical things that we mostly know but sometimes forget.

First, discipleship begins with listening. Presumably, Peter had been listening to Jesus in the synagogue before Jesus stops by his house. He's listening while Jesus teaches from the boat. He listens well enough to understand who Jesus is when the miraculous catch happens, to understand that he's not really worthy to follow Jesus, well enough to understand the opportunity offered to do something beyond filling your boat with fish.

It's Lent, a time for listening, reflecting, learning from Jesus. There's a lot in the Bible that is difficult to understand, but the gospels are pretty accessible. They're not written in some secret code. Some of Jesus' teaching is challenging, but it's not too hard to get what he's saying. We should be reading the whole Bible, but I agree with a lot of biblical teachers that the gospels are especially important. Discipleship begins by listening to Jesus.

Second, we need faith partners, a faith community. When Jesus sends disciples out to proclaim the good news and to heal, he sends them in pairs. I enjoy getting feedback on my sermons, but the comments I enjoy hearing the most begin: "We were talking about your sermon..." We need to talk with each other about what we hear. We need to check our hearing out with what others are hearing. The Bible is easy to misunderstand. A lot of ridiculous claims are made about what it "says." If it doesn't make sense or match your experience, run it by a partner in the faith.

Third, faith centers around "good news." Jesus sent the disciples out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. He sends a larger group out in pairs to bring a message of "peace." These are the things we learn as the called disciples of Christ, and these are the things we are sent to take to others in the world. Too often the church has delivered a message of judgment and condemnation. Too often, we've tried to tell women what they can and cannot do with their bodies. We've declared AIDS to be the punishment of God against homosexuality. We've barred people who divorce from communion.

As followers of Jesus, we bear the imprint of God's kingdom in our bodies and souls. We are its ambassadors, offering grace, forgiveness and peace to a hurting world. That's the message, a message filled with hope.

And finally, we need to stop selling ourselves short and raise our expectations. When Peter cast the nets into the sea, he didn't expect to catch any fish, but the boat was filled beyond capacity. When the disciples are sent out by Jesus to proclaim good news and to heal, we don't know what they expected, but they returned with stories of healing and casting out demons. We do sometimes do what Jesus asks of us, and the testimony we have to offer is not a little thing. We've walked people through illness and grief. We've raised hope in the lives of despairing people. We've eased minds, overcome evil and violence, worked for justice, healed the earth, and nurtured spirits. We've brought peace into more than a few households.

The "harvest is plentiful," but the laborers few. Jesus can't go to all the places he intends to go, so he sends disciples. He sends you. That's part of the following, going places where Jesus is needed: feeding the hungry, tending to the sick, freeing the oppressed.

Sometimes the word isn't earth-shattering. There are no great revelations today, just a simple reminder that we are called and sent not by compulsion but with our heartfelt consent. You already knew that following Jesus begins with listening, that our faith is strengthened in Christian community, that we are sent into the world with good news. We serve a gracious Lord, so expect the best.

Amen.