

“Immediately they left their nets and followed (Jesus).”

Immediately. There is something admirable about the reaction of those two sets of fishermen to Jesus’ call. No question. No *but let me ask you this first*. . . Just pure response. *Immediately.* There is also something troubling about that reaction. Was it really that immediate? Did Matthew leave out some connective tissue that would explain what happens between “call” and “follow” to unleash the latter? I wonder. I wonder about that, especially in the phrasing of that second response. *“Immediately they left the boat and **their father** and followed him.”*

In my early years of ministry and preaching, I resonated with immediacy. Jesus was/is so convincing, nothing else should be needed. Just the word of invitation: and life was dropped, kin and jobs and lifestyles left, and following immediately happened. As Chef Emeril used to say: “BAM!!” Yet. . . that kind of immediacy was more the exception in my experience of callings in parish life and Christian journey. I do not rule out the power of Jesus’ presence to evoke such immediacy in calls to follow, then and now. But let me offer another consideration.

Rev. Irene Martin was the Episcopal priest in a town near mine in southwest Washington. Before and after she entered the priesthood, Irene and her husband were and continued to be commercial fishers on the Columbia River and in Alaska. Out of that unique blend, Irene wrote a book called *Sea Fire*. Among the wealth of its insights, her book addresses Matthew’s call story. As Irene knew from the inside out, fishing communities are tight knit, whether in Galilee or Cathlamet. Fishers compete with each other, but also rely on each other. It takes time for a stranger to break into such circles. For Irene, what would make Matthew’s call stories plausible, especially in terms of immediacy, would be prior relationship between Jesus and the fishers. Her perspective: Jesus was a carpenter, and carpentry was needed for maintenance of the boats and even the nets. When Jesus calls, he does so not as a stranger entering the scene for the first time. Jesus speaks as one who was known, one whose word could be trusted – even when the ask is, *follow me*.

That has been my experience in Christian community. To be known, trusted, in relationship: such foundations provide the best prospect for calls to follow being heard and responded to, whether immediately or not. Jesus’ familiarity with those fishers and their life may add an insight into his dubbing of Simon as *Petros* or *Cephas*: “rock.” In Galilee’s Sea, the ancient anchors were rocks. So, to paraphrase Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:18: “upon this rock, I will *anchor* my church.”

For Reflection and Action:

*What do you find most inspiring, most baffling, most challenging, in Matthew’s story?
Would prior relationship of Jesus with the fishers weaken or strengthen the story; why?
In your experience, what has helped or hindered some call of yours related to faith?*