

Apprentices of Jesus

Matt 4:18-22; Luke 5:1-6

The first thing Jesus did, not second or third, after his baptism and testing in the wilderness was to call some disciples. Even God and Jesus need disciples! And Matthew's gospel is preeminently a training manual for disciples. I have called this series of sermons based on Matthew, "A Field Guide For Befuddled Followers of Jesus."

Some ministers and churches these days like to say: "We are not a 'membership organization', we are a 'discipleship organization'". So good so far, but what does "disciple" mean? Dallas Willard, as I'll talk about later, likes the word "apprentice" for disciple. That's a good start on our exploration.

Our texts for today are of two stories of Jesus calling of his first disciples. Let's take a look.

I

In Matthew's gospel Jesus is going along the Sea of Galilee when he sees Simon (Whom he will later nickname "Peter") and his brother throwing their net into the sea. "Follow me" he said to them, "following Jesus" being the key meaning of what it means to be a disciple, "and I will make you fishers of people."

The image is of Jesus and his disciples casting nets together to haul people in who are drowning in the sea.

“Rescue the perishing, care for the dying”, we used to sing, “Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save.” There are all kinds of ways of perishing, all kinds of ways Jesus comes to save. We get to be by Jesus’ side, casting our nets. Sometimes it’s we ourselves who have been hauled in to safety.

The text says that Peter and Andrew “Immediately” left their nets and followed him. Was this day the first time they had seen him or heard of him? Perhaps they had heard and been drawn to him before he came to the. That however, whenever Jesus calls us to follow there’s an immediacy to it, a right-now-ness to it.

The Jesus saw James and John sons of Zebedee fishing. They will also be called “sons of thunder”. Sue calls them “James and John Thunderson.” Jesus calls them and they too immediately leave their nets to follow.

Now let’s go to Luke’s story of the calling of the disciples. Jesus was teaching by the sea when he spied two boats. Peter, Andrew and James and John were on the shore washing their nets. When Jesus comes to call he climbs into our boats!

Then eh said, “Put out to the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” We need to get out of the shallows if we are to help people in trouble. We need to get out of the shallow to learn what it means to follow. You may remember Kenny Stable, the gunslinger of a quarterback for the Oakland Raiders known for his long passing for touchdowns. When he was inducted into the N.F.L. Hall of Fame eh offered these two words of advice: “Go deep.” So also Jesus.

Someone has quipped, “All the noise is at the shallow end of the pool.” That may pertain to our spirituality too. It is in the depths we discover God and discover our true selves. God is not just “up there”, “out there, but also, “in here” in the depths of me.

The Psalmist wrote:

Some go down to the sea in ships
ply their trade in the mighty water;
They have seen the works of the Lord
and God’s wonder in the deep.

Followers of Jesus don’t stay in the shallows. His churches don’t stay safe in the harbor.

Now to the word “apprentice” Dallas Willard in his book *The divine Conspiracy* offers us the word apprentice for disciple. And apprentice, he writes, is

...someone who had decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become capable of doing what that person does, or to become what that person is.

The word “apprentice” reminds us that there is a master from whom we are learning. It implies that there will be trial and error, success and failure as we learn. Anne Lamott writes that sometimes her thoughts “would make Jesus want to drink gin straight from the cat dish.”

The image of apprentice reminds us that it will take time? And it reminds us that our apprenticeship is not only about doing but also being. It is a personal land of learning. “Learn of me”, Jesus said. In the Suzuki method of violin teaching, which sometimes starts when a child is around 3 or 4, it’s not just about learning how to hold the bow and make notes, it’s about a way of living your life. So much more with Jesus.

What are the “appropriate conditions” Willard talks about under which we can be apprentices of Jesus?

I think it begins with dwelling in Jesus' words and teachings and letting them dwell in us. Let time in and let them have their way with us. We take time with them. A philosopher said that his first word to budding philosophers was "take time!" Take time, not just in a chronological sense, but in the sense of taking time to sit still, letting Jesus' words and teaching sink in to the deepest parts of ourselves.

Disciple means literally "learner" and we get to be "lifetime learners of Jesus." The poet Rilke described knowledge as "inexhaustible pleasure". So learning of Jesus can be.

Another "appropriate condition" is to learn of Jesus in the company of those trying to do the same. Few do it better alone. We help each other in our understanding of what it means to be a Jesus follower. In church we get to do so weekly. And this circle of learning also includes the stories and writing of those through history who have been seeking what it means to follow Jesus.

III

Do we decide for Jesus once and for all, or all along the way? Jurgen Moltmann, one of the greatest theologians of our time, was conscripted into Hitler's army. He became a Christian in a Scottish prisoner of war camp. The chaplain there gave him a copy of the New Testament gospels and Psalms. As he

read them, as he took time with them, he became a follower of Jesus. But that was not the end and all of it. In his autobiography he wrote:

I have never decided for Christ once and for all, as is often demanded of us. I have decided again and again in specific terms for discipleship of Christ when situation were serious and it was necessary. But right down to the present day, after almost 60 years, I am certain that there in 1941 and there in a Scottish prison of war camp, in the dark part of my soul, Jesus sought me and found me.

This resonates with me, in deciding for Christ in little and larger ways. Will I strike back, with I tell the truth. Will I stand with God's little ones?

There was an early morning in Ft. Worth when in the drowsy first waking consciousness, I heard a voice saying, "Go join Michael." Here's the story. Michael Bell was a Black clergy friend. He had begun with a few other black ministers an early morning protest at an elementary school in an affluent area of the city to address the inequities in the school system between white children and black and Hispanic children. The parents of the children at the school were not happy to be met by this group of protestors as they brought their children to school. They were getting bad press. Some of these parents were in my church.

That morning out of the blue, came the words into my mind. “Go join Michael”. I put on my suit and tie and went down the street to join them. Was the voice I heard that early morning the voice of Christ, or conscience speaking? Was it as Scrooge said to the Ghost of Jacob Marley merely “a bit of undigested potato?” Such a prompting had never happened before. I wonder how many times I have not been sensitive to such promptings, much less followed them. But that day, as Moltman put it, I ‘decided for the discipleship of Jesus.”

Missionary Theologian E. Stanley Jones says that when we become “Christian” we give as much of ourselves as we can to as much of Christ as we know.” Then the adventure of discipleship begins, discovering more and more of ourselves to give and more and more of Christ to give ourselves to.

IV

What does it mean to become a Christian, a disciple, a follower of Jesus? I love how Wendell Berry answered when Bill Moyers in his PBS show asked near the end of his interview, “Do you still consider yourself a Christian?” Berry answered:

I consider myself a person who takes the gospels very seriously. And I read in them and am shamed by them and sometimes utterly baffled by them. But there is a good bit of the gospel that I do get, I think. And I’m sticking

to that. And I'm hanging on the part I don't understand. And, you know, willing to endure the shame of falling short as a price of admission.

That sounds like a disciple to me, part of the "field guide for befuddled followers of Jesus."

Will you come and follow me,

(The Iona hymn goes)

if I but call your name?

Will you go where you don't know

and never be the same?

Will you let my love be shown,

will you let my name be known,

will you let my life be grown

in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see

if I but call your name?

Will you set the prisoners free

and never be the same?

Will you kiss the leper clean
and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean
in you and you in me?

And this verse, the most personal one?

Will you love the 'you' you hide
if I but call your name?

Will you quell the fear inside
and never be the same?

Will you use the faith you've found
to reshape the world around
through my sight and touch and sound
in you and you in me?

I think that hymn gets it right.

Amen

