

Sunday, September 10, 2023
I Corinthians 12:4-11; Matthew 4:12-23
“Following the Light”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, Preaching

Some people hear a voice calling them or God speaks directly to them. Some people see a vision or Jesus appears to them in a dream. Some people know the exact moment of their “calling,” when a light pierced their darkness. “Follow me,” Jesus said and they went - to become ministers, missionaries, disciples of God. And I believe this to be true for many people. I met quite a few when I was in Seminary, **many** years ago! But for most of us however, our “calling”, our road to discipleship, our following Jesus, is it a bit more complicated than that. There is no brightly lit straight path in front of us, ours is a bit greyer and windier, rainy and shadowy at times.

I remember when I first entered Seminary. I was fresh out of college, knowing only that I wanted to continue my education in religious studies, my college major. My college advisor is the one who suggested a Master of Divinity Degree from Seminary, and then a Ph.D. in any area I found interesting after that – maybe world religions, maybe theology. So off I went to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and even though I was the granddaughter of a Presbyterian Minister and the niece of a Presbyterian Minister, the thought of ministry never even entered my mind. I had never even seen a woman in the pulpit.

After moving into my one room apartment on campus with a mattress, a desk and one chair, and maybe \$20 to my name, I knew the first thing I needed was a job or maybe two. I wisely sought a job in the cafeteria so that I had one free meal a day and, what else, but a youth director position at a local church, that was almost a requirement of any first year student. During my first week at that little church, I was asked to participate in the worship service. Okay, I thought, I had read scripture in my home church, I can do that. Prepare a children’s sermon, they said. Okay, I **think** can do that.

Well, when I entered the pastor’s office that Sunday morning, I was given a long black robe to put on and was handed **extra prayers** I was to read as well. It was then that I became a **bit** nervous. As we entered the sanctuary, I tripping over that long men’s robe I was given; a man attached a microphone to me saying, “just don’t even think about all those people”. Looking out at the congregation of maybe 50, I said, “What people?” “Oh,” he said, “you know, all those people listening on the radio.” It was then that I began to panic. And that my friends, was the beginning of my ministry.

During that first year of Seminary, I never received a vision or had a dream, except for maybe a nightmare or two; but I slowly began to feel something. Not only did I realize that I could, with a **lot** of help, serve in the ministry, I realized I should.

For many of us the call to ministry or church work or discipleship, isn’t a quick drop of a net and simply following Jesus in the light of God, it’s more of a slow process. I wouldn’t describe my entering into the ministry as kicking and screaming all the way, but it was certainly a roundabout, through the side door approach. I even took the next year off seminary, moved, got married, transferred to Princeton Seminary, found a mentor in another church to work with, walk with, and follow, and did an awful lot of praying!

When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove. That same spirit then led Jesus into the wilderness where he faced many temptations. Following that time, Jesus was again filled with the power of the spirit and he set out to begin his ministry. Jesus' ministry starts out rather ominously, as John's imprisonment sparks Jesus to withdraw to what might be considered the backwaters of Capernaum in Galilee. But Jesus begins in the town of Capernaum for a very specific reason. Even beyond fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy. The people who lived in this district had been decimated by war and conflict and had lost most of their young men to slavery in distant lands. They saw only gloom, anguish, and darkness. So where does Jesus go first to begin his ministry? To the bright city of Jerusalem? NO, to the darkest place of all, in Capernaum, Jesus brings light and hope. A light had come to outshine their darkness.

And Jesus doesn't set out to accomplish this ministry alone, but gathers disciples, witnesses, preachers and hearers. Jesus saw Simon and his brother Andrew, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and he stopped. He knew he needed help continuing his message, his ministry, his mission. And he knew these young men. Watching them cast their nets got him thinking. These were men who knew about real life. They knew hardships, hard work, honest labor. They were filled with diligence, patience and faithfulness. And they didn't complain or ask any questions of their friend, they just went, not knowing where they were going; but knowing very well whom they followed.

When Jesus told those fishermen, to drop their nets and follow him, he didn't mean they were to give up their lives' vocation, all of their possessions, their family, their dreams, to become a disciple of Christ - he meant, follow me, learn from me, act like me, **be** like me and you will be my disciple. As a matter of fact, most of Jesus' ministry took place in a very small area so many of the disciples kept their day jobs and lived at home. What Jesus asked them, was to leave what they knew and were comfortable with and enter into a new lifestyle with different values and goals. It wouldn't be easy though and we know those first disciples did not understand, some fled, some disobeyed, some denied even knowing him. But they did learn and try to follow.

And so, after calling his disciples to join him, Jesus begins his first preaching tour, and his first sermon title - "Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven draws near!" - Sounds kind of harsh and a bit John-the-Baptist-like if you ask me, but it was exactly what the people really needed to hear because to repent means to turn. To change direction. In this case, Jesus was calling people to turn to him, to take responsibility for centering their lives on this new way God was working in the world, to be in relationship with one another.

A few weeks ago, we baptized a couple children and you heard that we are all God's beloved children. And being a child of God is our true calling. You see, God's call of each one of us isn't simply to do something, but rather to be something, a child of God. Not to give up our vocation, our possessions, our family, our lives. Our calling is less about what we do and more about who we are. Before God calls us to do anything, God first calls us to be something. Now don't get me wrong, we need people to do things, serve here, work there, please sign up after worship! And maybe being, recognizing you are a child of God, comes from doing. Maybe being even makes doing possible.

Think about this, for most of us work is, well, work, hopefully with moments of meaning and purpose but often devoid of significant connection to whom you really believe yourself

to be and to the rest of your life. Am I right? So, maybe the doing will come from your work. Maybe through Volunteering. Maybe through your serving. That is what Jesus meant by "follow me".

We are called to follow, but it's not a program. Not a series of classes or four spiritual laws you must learn. Wouldn't that be easier! It is becoming like Jesus as we walk with him here and in the real world. To follow Christ in worship, word, and witness, in whatever we do, in wherever we go.

However, Jesus said nothing about the ingredients of a successful church: nothing about church schools, choirs, finance committees, buildings, or meetings. Rather, he asked people to walk in his footsteps--to heal the sick, to teach the Gospel, and to proclaim God's love for others. To accomplish this he didn't ask for volunteers, he appointed disciples! People who work hard, know pain and hardship, and yet know there is so much more to life. And you must decide where God is calling you to serve in this place and how you serve outside of this place, in the real world.

Now Jesus brilliantly uses the image of fishing, "let us fish for people" or be "fishers of people". He uses this image for a reason. Not only because it was an image those first disciples could appreciate and understand, but it's also a great one. Fishing takes patience, discipline, skill, and practice. **I don't like fishing.** Almost every year my husband, who loves fishing, asks for one thing for his birthday - to go deep sea fishing with me! And I did this, maybe twice - I got up in the dark at - who knows what hour in the morning - popped a couple Bonine or Dramamine, grabbed a huge cup of coffee, a box of crackers and off we went on a boat near Montauk. One year the whole family went. After my husband caught a few small blue fish, my daughter and I sat in the fighting chairs with our huge rods. And waited and waited.

Suddenly we both caught something, we struggled and heaved and pulled and sweated and complained, while my husband laughed at us, calling us wimps, thinking we too had caught little blue fish like he had. Well, when we each pulled in a Striped Bass weighing almost 45 pounds each! - he stopped laughing. I still have the picture of that ugly fish on our mantle. I managed a smile long enough to hold it up proudly. And I still don't like fishing. It takes patience, discipline, skill and determination. Jesus used that image for a reason.

And some of the best fishing is done with a lot of people. The net those fishermen used way back in the time of Jesus was like a seine net, which is about 60 feet long and takes 3-4 people to carry out into the water with each end. "The group struggles, pushing against the surf, until the water is almost over their heads and then, they turn. But they turn a particular way. They turn against the current, so that the current forces fish into the net. This is hard work, dragging a long net against the current, but it's the best way to use the current. One of the great features of this net is that it brings in everything, it is not selective." (1) Now you want to tell me that Jesus didn't chose this image on purpose? All are chosen, all are welcome to follow.

For we, **We** are the keepers of the net - we are here under the net of God's great grace - but we are not trapped; we are embraced. It only asks that we jump in and let the current carry us all the way home - serving, healing, speaking, helping people along the way - here in the church and outside these doors. Being keepers of the net, followers of Christ, means

being open to new ways of thinking, as Paul tells the Corinthians, to allow the spirit of God within us to use our gifts for the good of all, to let go and allow things to happen to us, to open some windows and let the light of God in, sometimes all the way into the ministry for some but for all of us, to explore different ways to - - **do** what we love and **serve** as we should.

I've come just a long way since that first church position – over 30 years ago – although I am still sometimes thrown off during a children's sermon – you never can predict what they will say and still fear tripping on my long robe on those steps, but one thing has always been clear to me and always will be – I know the one whom I follow in the light. Jesus didn't say, follow me and I will capture you into my net, dragging you in, – no, Jesus said, follow me and I will wade into the deep waters with you, follow me and I will help you struggle against the current, follow me and we will ride the tide together right into an ocean of love, joy, peace and eternal life. In the name of the one who lights our way and takes us fishing each day. Amen.

1) Cadler, The Rev. Samuel. "Follow me and I will make you go fishing." 1/23/05, www.Day1.org