

## **“Follow Me” – Mark 1:14-20**

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Creator God, we thank you for calling all life and each of us into being. We thank you for your gracious love that sustains, guides, and inspires us. Today, as we consider your calling and invitation into discipleship, may we listen for your word to each of us. Amen.

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Imagine you are a Galilean fisherman or fisherwoman back in the first century. It's the only life you've ever known. You grew up near the Sea of Galilee. Your family has operated a fishing business for generations. You know everything there is to know about boats, nets, finding the best catch, and everything else involved with fishing. You've eaten a lot of fish. And you've learned the best ways to prepare it and cook it. Fishing has been your livelihood and the lifeblood of your family.

And then one day, Jesus shows up and asks you drop everything you are doing and follow him. “Follow me,” he says, “and I'll make you fish for people.” It's time for a career change.

Would you go? What would you think about this itinerant rabbi and his invitation? Would you ask any questions? What do you mean exactly... fish for people; how does that work and why? What kind of time commitment are we talking about here? Where are we going anyway?

Mark doesn't tell us if the disciples asked any questions right off the bat. He just simply tells us that they followed. Simon (who would later be named Peter) and his brother Andrew left their nets in the sea. James and John left their dad, Zebedee, in the boat (with some hired help, at least). All four guys drop what they're doing, right in the middle of their day's tasks, and head off with Jesus.

I've always imagined poor Zebedee being like, “James, John! Uh, where are you going? We're not done yet!”

In Mark's telling of this story, the abruptness and eagerness with which these four new disciples accept this invitation to follow sure makes it seem like these fishermen who are used to being the ones doing the catching have now been caught in the net of Jesus. Jesus wanted to teach them how to fish for people and he started by catching them.

Part of the point of this story and the way Mark tells it is to emphasize that the choice to accept Jesus' invitation to discipleship does involve letting go of old ways of living and embracing a new path. And so, this story begs the question, how have we been caught in the net of Jesus? And what does that mean for us right now at this point in our lives?

For these first disciples, saying yes meant letting go of the fishing life they knew for a new one. To break with one's family occupation was a huge disruption that affected their own lives and the lives of their families. Not everyone might have been happy with their decision.

I wonder how Zebedee felt about it. Maybe he wondered who would take over the family business. Maybe he wondered about who would care for him later in life. I wonder if he ever talked to James and John about this. After all, it's not like they left town that day. They all stayed near Galilee for some time and they set up a sort of home base at Peter's house in Capernaum. Maybe they even still found some time to do some fishing.

But things did change when they accepted this invitation to follow Jesus. And they would continue to change as time went on and they more deeply and fully embraced this call to discipleship, as they learned from Jesus' example how to teach, how to serve, how to care, how to heal, and how to live towards the vision of the Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed had now come near.

In her sermon, *Miracle on the Beach*, former Episcopal priest, professor, and author, Barbara Brown Taylor said:

*[The disciples] gave up a lot in that moment and would lose a lot more before they were through; but to stress that aspect of the story is to put the accent on the wrong syllable. Their minds were not on what they were leaving but on whom they were joining. Their hearts did not cleave to what was falling from their hands but to what they were reaching out to find, and in that God-drenched moment of their turning to follow, the miracle occurred: their lives flowed in the same direction as God's life. Their wills were not two, three, or four, but one will. Time was fulfilled. The kingdom came – and [the kingdom] comes every time our own lives are brought into the same flow, so that we too allow ourselves to fall in love, follow God, and can do no other.*

I just love this description of discipleship: "The Kingdom of God comes every time our own lives are brought into the same flow, so that we too allow ourselves to fall in love, follow God, and can do no other." Following God's flow; that is the work of a disciple.

Indulge me for a moment and now imagine you are a fish. It's as though rather than simply casting a net and pulling us clear out of the water, God is instead always nudging us gently back into the current, back into the flow, back into the way of Jesus. In that way, God catches us over and over again. And we respond to the invitation of Jesus to follow with today's particular yes. And those many moments of responding to God's call add up to a lifetime of discipleship, a vocation of doing our best to follow where Jesus leads.

Following the flow of God, embracing this path of discipleship, is a joyful journey. But that doesn't mean it is always easy, of course.

Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, has a line in its statement of faith that I often find myself returning to: "You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of

discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory."

That opening phrase, "to accept the cost and joy of discipleship" reminds us that discipleship, though a joyful journey, does come with a cost sometimes. There may be times when we are called to give up something in order to bring the good news, be the good news, for others for the world. Perhaps, like the first disciples, we might sometimes need to let go of our nets, our tools of the trade, our familiar ways of living and doing things, and find some new tools. It's more than just an abstract notion; we have all had to do some of this over the past year in various ways.

With acceptance of the invitation to discipleship comes the willingness to learn and grow, the willingness to be challenged and changed. We are invited to put our faith in God as our top priority in our lives – above our personal ambitions and goals. It's not that we can't have personal ambitions and goals. But what is most important?

And how does our faith help shape, guide, and give purpose and depth to those personal ambitions and goals? How does our faith and the values we learn from Jesus help direct the flow, the current, of our lives? How does commitment to the way of Jesus, the way of compassion and love, move us to live out our discipleship in everything we do? Sure, that can be a challenging question, but it is an exciting one too that can bring us a sense of purpose, and inspiration.

There's an old preacher's joke that upon the occasion of preaching on this story of the call of the first disciples, a pastor simply walked in on Sunday morning as the service was starting, hung a sign on the pulpit that read "Gone Fishing," and left the building without another word.

Tempting! But the joke stops there. What happened next? Did the pastor actually go fishing? Take the day off? Head to the golf course? Slack off? That's kind of what's implied.

What if instead, the pastor went and served a meal at a soup kitchen? Or went to the street corner and prayed for people who passed by? Or went down to the nearest homeless shelter or nursing home and led worship there? What if instead of saying nothing and leaving alone, the pastor invited the congregation to go along? That might change this story from a joke to an inspiring and challenging sermon-in-action.

The story of the call of Jesus to his first disciples offers the contemporary church an important reminder: this movement Jesus started, that we are now a part of, didn't start in a building on a Sunday morning. It started with Jesus going for a walk along the shores of Galilee. It started with Jesus boldly proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was at hand to some fishermen he met along the way who were willing to get caught up in the flow of the Holy Spirit and follow him. It all started with an invitation to a relationship and to a journey of faith.

Part of this path of discipleship is asking how our faith in God informs all aspects of our living. And sometimes that involves taking a look at our reality, our world, in all its beauty and its messiness through the lens of faith and reflecting on how we are called to live, to engage and embrace the world, and act upon our faith with love.

Carmelite monk, Father William McNamara, defined spiritual contemplation as: “a long, loving look at the real.” I first heard that definition when I was in college and took a class with a couple of Carmelites. It challenged and inspired me then and does still.

When we take a long, loving look at the real – at this life, this world, our lived reality in its totality – the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the uplifting and the challenging – we are invited first to see our Creator alive and at work in this creation, and second to consider how and where God is calling us to be at this moment in our lives.

Sometimes these long, loving looks fills us with awe, and wonder, and joy – the majesty of a mountain, the glow of a sunset, the power of a crashing wave. Sometimes we are simply called as disciples to be in the moment and to enjoy, appreciate, and give thanks for the beauty that surrounds us and God’s presence in it.

And sometimes these long, loving looks are more difficult. Part of discipleship is facing the tough stuff of life with openness, compassion, and faith.

I hope many of you have had a chance to watch Grant White’s documentary on homelessness in Long Beach. If you haven’t yet, the YouTube link has been included in our recent Carillon newsletter issues. I encourage you to watch. “I Am Somebody” is the title of the film. When I watched it, I experienced it as one of these long, loving looks at the real – real people, real struggles, and their lived realities in our city.

The short film doesn’t seek to provide all the answers to this complex issue. As we know, homelessness is complicated. There are a lot of reasons that lead people to experience homelessness. There are a lot of challenges in connecting people to services that can help. There are societal, political, and financial complexities. And though there are a lot of caring people working for and with people who experience homelessness, it remains a big and challenging issue in a lot of places, including here in Long Beach.

What this film does that is so powerful is to invite us in. It lifts up the voices and experiences of real people. It affirms their human dignity. It reminds us that people who experience homelessness are our neighbors and members of our community. It invites us to stay engaged and to respond from a place of compassion.

When it comes down to it, in all sorts of circumstances, I think that a big part of discipleship is staying engaged and responding from a place of compassion. We may not always have all the answers, all the solutions. But we can stay engaged and we can always choose compassion as our starting place.

When Jesus asked Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow him that day, he knew they didn't have all of the answers and all of the solutions. He knew they had a lot to learn. But he also knew they had open hearts and willing spirits.

It's the same with us.

They said yes and they followed, wondering where it all might lead, yet trusting in their leader to show them the way.

And now it's our turn to follow, to say yes, and to keep saying yes, trusting that Jesus continues to show us the way.

Amen.