

“Follow Me” – Do You Hear Jesus’ Call?

Matthew 4:12-23. Isaiah 9:1-4
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
January 26, 2020

Typical of the first semester at seminary is a class, broken into small groups, in which new students share what is known as their “call story”. I vividly remember to this day, just over 30 years ago now, when it was my turn to share what I understood as God’s calling me into ordained ministry. And in the Presbyterian understanding, that involves not only a sense of a personal call, but also a communal call confirmed by the session of one’s home church, and by their local presbytery.

I’m not going to share that with you this morning, but want to encourage you to reflect upon your understanding of being called to ministry. And no, that doesn’t automatically mean being called to be a pastor of a congregation, or as a missionary to some third-world country.

I use the word ‘ministry’ in it’s broadest sense. For we hold to the belief that God, by virtue of our baptism, places a call onto the hearts, minds and spirits of everyone. That’s why our worship bulletin each Sunday lists, “Ministers: All the members of the congregation.” So, perhaps a more understandable phrase is to **ask how you have responded to the call to active and faithful discipleship. And by discipleship, I simply mean how each of us follows the ways and teachings of Jesus in our daily lives, personally and professionally.**

Just two weeks ago during a called Session Meeting, we asked the new incoming ruling elders onto the Session (beginning their 3-year term) how they understood their being called by God to serve this congregation and denomination in a leadership capacity. Using this morning’s Gospel Reading from Matthew 4 as a guide, when Jesus calls four fishermen to follow him, we’re going to explore the issue of **what it means in your life and mine, and in the life of this congregation, to respond to Jesus’ call to follow him.**

Matthew reports that as Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, one who is named Simon (who will later be renamed, Peter) and Andrew. Both were working together to cast a net into the sea. I get a big kick out of Matthew adding, “for they were fishermen,” as if his readers needed an explanation of why two grown men are casting a net into the sea. With an economy of words, Jesus simply says to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Without any explanation of why, we’re told they “immediately left their nets and followed” Jesus. The same thing happens when Jesus comes across two other brothers, James and John. They were mending their nets in a boat with their father, Zebedee. This was obviously the family business and their livelihood.

On a literal level, the act of immediately leaving their profession seems oddly impractical, perhaps irresponsible, and not all that realistic. But the gospel writer is simply following a common literary pattern known as a “call story,” dozens of which occur throughout the Old and New Testaments. **A primary characteristic of most call stories is to explain the abruptness and total commitment demonstrated by those being called by God.** In the case of Simon and Andrew, they gave up their profession and very livelihood in order to follow Jesus. This is still common among 2nd-career pastors. James and John gave up more than that, for they also violated the patriarchal system of their day by not asking for the permission of their father, but simply left him sitting in the boat. That’s not

cool by any societal standards. So, rather than attaching too literal of an interpretation to these call stories, their primary purpose was to indicate that **answering God's call to discipleship always comes with a cost.**

We are being informed that perhaps there are some things we must be willing to give up in order to follow Jesus as our guide and teacher. That shouldn't really surprise us, however, because there is no ministry effort that doesn't bear a cost, whether it be in the form of the sharing of our time, our talents, and yes, even our financial resources. And sometimes it involves moving out beyond our own protective comfort zone. We experience this, for example, every time we put being inclusive into practice.

A major point of the story of Jesus' calling of the first disciples, then, is to indicate **the response of those being called by God.** The four fishermen, without any explanation of what Jesus was actually calling them to do, responded by dropping everything and immediately following Jesus by joining him in his ministry. Yet, the Bible has some examples of other types of responses of those being called by God. For example, **Moses'** first response was to say that he had a speech impediment and that God should send somebody else to Pharaoh. **Jonah's** first response was to get into a boat and hightail it in the exact opposite direction of where God wanted him to go, to Nineveh.

Here, therefore, is what we are faced with. Since you and I are also called by God in one fashion or another to discipleship and a particular ministry effort, which we believe we are by virtue of our baptism, it makes sense that we should also pay careful attention to how we respond. Even if we begin by giving some kind of justification of why God must have gotten the wrong person, or congregation, do we usually end up responding by following the call or not? **Without any guilt trip intended, is there perhaps a calling to which you have yet to respond?** Let me state at this point that this congregation, for 108 years now, has a very long history of faithfully answering the call to discipleship – in this neighborhood, this city, this denomination, and beyond.

Now, concerning the actual call to discipleship itself, **how do we "hear," discern, or experience that call in the first place?** Like most spiritual matters, that depends upon your understanding of the nature and character of God. Therefore, trying to precisely describe just *how* God puts a call on our hearts and minds varies from person to person. I've always contended that **God speaks to each and every person's heart, mind and spirit in the way and manner in which that person can hear and understand.** So again, that will depend upon your own theological understanding of God. That also means that how you hear and discern God's call may even change throughout your own journey of faith. It certainly has in mine as my own theological perspective has become broader and more progressive.

There are a few things, however, that might help us to hear, to discern God's call to follow. As far as the ministry efforts in your personal life and within the life of this congregation is concerned, I would suggest that **God is calling you to:**

- **the particular service that excites you the most;**
- **those areas that are a good match with your God-given gifts and talents;**
- **the type of ministry you feel most passionate about;**
- **the projects or organizations that energize you, not drain you.**

And know there is such a thing as **compassion fatigue** (of which pastors are also susceptible) thus calling for a break, or a new direction. This thought process is what each of the ruling elders used to discern what ministry team to serve on during the coming year. I would suggest the same exercise to each of you, to see where you might best offer your

time and talents to the ministry efforts of this community of faith, or to wherever. And if you need some help in that discernment process, perhaps I, or a congregation member, or a family member or friend can help in this regard.

Going back briefly to Matthew's gospel story, the initial call to those four fishermen was quite focused and specific. Upon hearing Jesus' call to follow him, they started a new kind of fishing – fishing for people. If an element of our own calling involves a similar directive, then what exactly does that mean? I agree with most modern biblical interpreters that **consider the phrase “fish for people” not primarily as a way to grow church membership and fill the pews (for after all, there was no Christian Church yet), but rather as a way to invite other people into a way of life that lives out and furthers the realm and kin-dom of God in our midst. It's more about relationship than about an institution.**

The term that perhaps best describes this element of discipleship is evangelism, the sharing of good news. While this term is all but a four-letter word for most Presbyterians, it is one that we have been trying hard to reclaim. That's because evangelism itself doesn't have anything to do with any particular theological perspective, like evangelicalism. Therefore, we can all reach out to others with **the good news of God's inclusive love and grace and acceptance, and our dedication to issues such as progressive theological thought, peace, justice and equality, inclusivity, and providing a safe, hospitable place where folks can explore and question their own journey of faith. Let this reaching out be a priority for us all during this coming year.**

And remember the simplicity and clarity of Jesus' call, recognizing the words, **“Follow me,” more of an invitation than a command.** So as always, how you and I respond to that call to follow Jesus is up to each one of us, individually and as a congregation.

Let us now join together in the printed Litany of Call, found as a bulletin insert.

A Litany of Call

by Katherine Hawker for the Evangelical United Church of Christ, 2003. Adapted by Rev. Todd Freeman

A Sacred Presence called long ago.

A Sacred Presence calls today.

A Sacred Presence compelled prophets and disciples to follow.

A Sacred Presence compels us to follow.

A Sacred Presence called to Simon and Andrew, James and John, and others, persuading them to share the good news – to turn to the ways of God and accept God's redemptive love.

A Sacred Presence calls to us today, that we might be persuaded to share the good news – to turn back to the ways of God and accept God's redemptive love.

Empowered by God, women and men of old answered the call to service.

Empowered by God, women and men of today answer the call to service.

A Sacred Presence called long ago.

A Sacred Presence calls today.

The call is offered to each and every one of us.

May we have the ears to hear, and the courage to follow.

Amen.