

Follow Me

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Matthew 4:12-23

A week ago, you no doubt will remember, we explored the question “what are you looking for,” using Jesus’ question to curious onlookers as a kind of prompt, an invitation to explore – in the poet Mary Oliver’s words – what we will do with our “one wild and precious life.” What are you looking for, Jesus asked, and then he continued – “come and see.”

That journey continues this morning with its natural next step, natural though no less transformative. “Follow me,” Jesus will say. Follow me. So, it seemed advisable to call on Mary Oliver again. Hear her well-known poem called “When Death Comes.”

“When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.”

To state it in the positive, “When it's over, I want to say all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.”

To state it in the negative, “I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.”

Jesus calls us to be more than visitors. Come and see, he says. Follow me, he continues. How we respond to that invitation will make all the difference. Two simple words with profound implications. Follow me. How we respond will impact our own lives, the lives of those around us, and the life of the community.

A week ago, in John's gospel, inquisitive followers pursued Jesus. They were curious and wanted to learn more. The dynamic shifts this morning, at the outset of Matthew's gospel. At what is presented as the beginning of his ministry, he heads north. He begins preaching and teaching, and his message is clear. Repent. Repent. The Greek word is something like the English word “metanoia.” It literally and simply means “change,” change, and has come to be associated with conversion.

Repent, Jesus says. Change. What needs changing, in those individual lives that heard his message, but also what needs changing culturally, socially, systemically?

He sees two brothers, Peter and Andrew. They are fishermen, and they are at work. Remember that in John's gospel, they pursue him. Here, Jesus initiates the conversation. “Follow me.” Follow me and I will make you fish for people. That's probably a better translation of the more familiar “and I will make you fishers of men.” Either way, it's a bold invitation.

What fishing for people looks like – whether it’s a particular understanding of evangelism, an enthusiastic call to conversion, of whether it’s a more open and inclusive invitation into the way of Jesus – all of that is up for discussion. But the invitation isn’t – follow me. And they did.

It is kind of stunning, if not also a little hilarious. “Immediately,” Matthew tells us, immediately they left their nets and followed him. It’s all very dramatic, like a moment in a movie. Others join, James and John, the latter two not only leaving their nets but abandoning their father, ditching their dad. My first real job was at a McDonalds, and I can imagine dropping my spatula and ripping off my paper hat and throwing it on the ground and my manager looking confused and not a little perturbed. These guys deserted their dad. Immediately, again, they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Chelsey Harmon writes that “It’s interesting to note...how last week’s calling narrative went against the grain of the normal practice: the would-be disciples sought Jesus out, leaving their rabbi, John, for a new teacher. Here, though, Matthew follows the tradition more closely—the rabbi seeks out his students. “The cost is the same,” she says: “leaving behind what is known and familiar, what has been one’s responsibilities, what had been previously committed to, and choosing to submit to a realm of many unknowns.”

There are so many entry points to all of his, but the basic ones are just that, basic, if not less profound. Jesus, the light, calls people to change, and because he is the promised light, we understand that that call is not just to a few fisher-persons. And we understand, I believe, that we have limited our understanding of repent to a focus on sinfulness. We don’t know that Peter and Andrew were sinners, any more than any of us are. But we do know they were compelled by the commandment to change, at some foundational level, for a life-changing course correction.

Harmon writes that “The call to change is fundamentally simple, but the practice of it is profoundly complicated.” Of those four, Andrew and Peter, James and John, she writes: “They had no idea how much everything was changing for them, let alone the world. What they were experiencing was a microcosm of the metanarrative of God’s love for the world. If these men were going to be a rabbi’s disciple, the time had long past. They were not smart enough or good enough to make the cut. But here comes Jesus, who, by extending the invitation to follow him, is telling them that they *are* good enough—that *he* wants them. He is willing to be with them, to put in the work as their rabbi, to trust them with his legacy.”

That’s what strikes me – come and see and follow me is not predicated on ability or credential. It is not based on stock portfolio value or academic pedigree. In fact, we will learn, there are times when those things get in the way. There is no interview, no Indeed or LinkedIn or Monster.com situation. Jesus simply sees us for who we are and who we can be and invites us.

But more than that. He empowers us. He illuminates the spiritual gifts that are already in us. He trusts us, more that we can often trust ourselves, and when we doubt ourselves, he again and

again reminds us that I have invited you, called you, empowered you. And because of that, you will be transformed, and you will make a difference.

It is not an easy life he promises, nor one without complications. Dropping everything and following him is a complex undertaking. It is to choose the road less travelled, in Frost's words. Even if we stay in place – at school, at work, in our relationships, in our communities – following him has implications and repercussions. And it offers extraordinary satisfaction and gratification, even if the metrics for such are on a different scale. As a young person, not choosing to enter the brutal world of social media, to accept yourself as you are and others as they are, and not as you are told to be. In work life, to make the ethical decisions, to say the right thing or do the right thing when the wrong thing would be so much easier. To spend time, and money, and energy, differently, because we follow this light rather than all of the lesser distractions. So many implications and repercussions met with profound satisfaction and gratification.

At the end of this past year, we marked the deaths of Barbara Walters, who changed TV journalism, the death of Pele, who brought soccer, the other football, to a grander world stage, and Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict, who influenced Roman Catholicism and beyond with his theological perspective. As impactful as those lives were, and influential, their call to follow, to make a difference, is no greater or less than ours, and their particular gifts to serve are no greater or less important than ours. That is what is so extraordinary. In God's world, per Martin Luther King, Jr., everyone can be great, because everyone can serve. Our credential is the invitation – come and see, follow me – and because we receive that invitation, and respond in the positive, we are gifted, empowered, to make a difference, and that difference is no more or less significant whether it's on the world stage or in mundane, quotidian moments in our very own backyards. Once we say yes to Jesus, we do so much more than simply visit the world. In Mary Oliver's words, we are able to say that “when it's over, we were that bride married to amazement, that bridegroom, taking the world into our arms.”

Later, Paul will write about different gifts, and how the body needs all of its parts to function. These four will be followed by others and then others and then others. Yet even in their work with him they will repeatedly miss the point, they will say stupid things, they will insult and offend, they will deny and betray. Yet Jesus keeps calling them back and empowering them and gifting them. That's what he does to us. He sees us, and even when we can't see the giftedness in ourselves, he does.

The Presbyterian writer Frederick Buechner, who died this past year, famously wrote that “Your vocation in life is where your deep gladness meets the world's greatest need.” It is a beautiful sentiment to which I frequently refer. Yet it's rarely as clear as that, is it? On many days, I prefer Buechner when he said, “Where your feet take you, that is who you are.” That seems more realistic, and more truthful, and reminds us that the choice to follow Jesus is not just one choice, but choice after choice, day by day.

- The writer Annie Dillard wrote that “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”
- A character in the book and TV show “Station Eleven” says “I don’t want to live the wrong life and then die.”
- The folk singer Pete Seeger said simply “I just want to make a contribution.”

All of these are fitting, pithy, suitable for a bumper sticker or a refrigerator magnet or a tattoo, if we are so inclined.

At Bible study this week, to which you are all invited, we spent time pondering why Jesus is so compelling, even early on in his earthly ministry. There is John’s testimony, of course, that this one is beloved by God in a special way, that he is both Lamb of God and light of the world. So of course he will draw attention. But what Jesus in his full humanity does for me is cut through so much noise and distraction and capacity for self-delusion. He knows we are on a journey, a quest, to find meaning in our own lives and in turn to make a difference in the world. He knows, even when we can’t, even when our attention is drawn elsewhere, or we doubt our own call or giftedness.

The invitation is simple and clear, if not simplistic and complex. What are you searching for? Come and see. You are on a journey? Repent – change, deep change, and follow me. You will be amazed, and you will be amazing. Amen.