

Will You Come and Follow Me

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

January 26, 2020

Matthew 4:12-23

A review of the well-known who died in 2019 is a veritable history lesson, global and personal. Cokie Roberts. The architect I.M. Pei. Ric Ocasek, Cars front man, who appears prominently on the soundtrack of my wish-I could-forget high school years. The great baseball icon Frank Robinson. The prophetic novelist Toni Morrison. Elijah Cummings. Opera singer Jessye Norman. And at least one name more, perhaps less familiar than these others, iconic nonetheless.

“I don't know exactly what a prayer is./I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down/into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,/how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,/which is what I have been doing all day.”

Those are words from the late poet Mary Oliver. She continues: “Tell me, what else should I have done?/ Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?/Tell me, what is it you plan to do/with your one wild and precious life?”

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? That is perhaps THE question asked of all of us, each of us. The question, period. God, the good and gracious giver, gives us this life. What will we do with it?

Oliver suggests how complex and extraordinary this gift is—wild *and* precious. We are to nurture it, cultivate it, carefully, mindfully. It is not fragile, exactly, but it is. And, we are to invest it boldly, spend it extravagantly, take risks, have “unique adventures,” as Auden would say. That is to say, our fragility can be met with a kind of robust resilience, preciousness met with wildness. That is life. How will we be good and faithful stewards of it? What will we do with it?

It's a good question, the best question, every morning that we rise and face a new day. We know how the well-known did it – how Elijah Cummings committed his life to his work, how Frank Robinson took batting practice pitch after batting practice pitch, how Toni Morrison wrote countless drafts before landing on the right word or sentence or paragraph. Clearly, they were gifted at their work, and worked hard at it. But before that, there was a sense that that was what they were called to do, gifted to do. And the ones I named were not just good at what they did; what they did made a difference.

And yet there is a warning. We can easily conflate all of this. I often think of my grandfather, Parker Wilkinson. Born in western Maryland, he was originally a coal miner, dangerous work. With many other men, he migrated north, to Akron, Ohio, to get a good factory job with Goodyear Tire and Rubber, from which he retired. He was able to buy a house, own a car, send my dad to college. That was his work. But his work was not who he was. He was a husband, a father and grandfather, an uncle, a friend, a neighbor, a citizen, a Presbyterian elder. All of those things comprising his one wild and precious life.

We need to be mindful that while we seek work that matters, we not allow our work to become our identity. And we need to be mindful for all those whose work does not provide meaning, and who search for meaningful work.

This is something deeper, vocation, calling, how we utilize our gifts for the common good, sometimes at home, sometimes in our neighborhoods and communities, sometimes at church.

Janet Hunt says it this way: “There is that for which we are paid and there is that for which we are made. For each and all of us. And I wonder what that means in each of our journeys. More precisely, what does it mean for those of us who have followed a particular call into a particular kind of work for which we **are** paid? Are we, in fact, **made** for some aspect of this or all aspects of this? Or is there something outside of this which holds an even deeper, truer call?”

I often think of those earliest followers of Jesus. Who were they? What were their lives like? Their families? Their work? How did they make ends meet in the fishing business? What was their faith? To be a little cheeky – what teams did they cheer for – Forty-niners or Chiefs? What bands did they like? Chocolate or vanilla?

And to be a little profound – what were they looking for? How were they living their one wild and precious life? How were they living it when Jesus saw them, when Jesus found them, when Jesus beckoned them?

In a strange way, we would not be here if not for them, if not for that first generation and every generation that followed, followers who responded in some way when Jesus saw them. Here they were, fishing, and Jesus said to them, “follow me.” Here we are, scrolling through our phone, watching the game, doing the dishes, walking the dog, and Jesus says “follow me.” It is extraordinary.

The interviews I had with your PNC less than a year ago now were the latest versions of many interviews I remember. Some went well. Some not so much. My first job, at a McDonald’s. Other jobs, where I tried to convince – sometimes successfully, others times not so much – that I was the right guy for the job. Others where I was less than enthusiastic and had to pretend so.

I also remember being on the other side of the table, asking questions, trying to discern if this one was the right one. Reading resumes, checking references.

None of that here. Jesus sees the two brothers, and he simply calls them. Follow me. He conducts no interviews. He asks for no references. There is no probationary period. They don't need to complete a FAFSA form. He doesn't ask what party they are a member of, who they love, check their stock portfolio, inquire about their GPA, see if they have a preexisting condition. He sees them and says "follow me." And they do. He saw something in them, in their heart, their soul, perhaps.

We know they were less than perfect. The next three years will clarify that. They squabble among themselves. They misinterpret his message time after time. In his most trying hour, they will fall asleep on him and deny him and betray him. And the next 2000 years of Christian history will continually prove that all those whom Jesus calls are less than perfect, far from perfect. And either that's not the point, that Jesus does not call perfect people. Or it IS the point, that Jesus calls less than perfect people. But that's who he calls. Them. Us.

A primary reason why it's important to re-think this whole matter, why Jesus doesn't worry about credentials or qualifications, is what he calls people to. Certainly, there is work to be done, tasks to complete, places to go, people to see. But the primary sense of calling, where Jesus invites us to follow, is in relationships. Relationships with him. Relationships with each other. Relationships with the world all around us.

David Lose invites us to "re-imagine just what it is that Jesus is calling these first disciples to be and do: *fishers of people*. And that implies *relationships*. Jesus, that is, calls these first disciples into relationship -- with himself, with each other, and with all the various people they will meet over the next few years and, indeed, the rest of their lives."

Lose says; "Jesus issues the same call to us -- to be in genuine and real relationships with the people around us, and to be in those relationships the way Jesus was and is in relationship with his disciples and with us: bearing each other's burdens, caring for each other and especially the vulnerable, holding onto each other through thick and thin, always with the hope and promise of God's abundant grace. Sometimes that call...will take us far from home and sometimes it will take shape in and among the persons right around us."

Sarah Dylan Breuer puts it this way: "Answering Jesus' call, we start to hear the world's cries; we are drawn into relationship as we find what we need to serve as Jesus' co-laborers in the world. It's not easy work, but it's the work we were born to do. It's the vocation where we will become more fully human and understand better what the divine is up to among us."

This is inclusive, to be sure. Jesus sees us. Jesus invites us. But it is more than that. It is radically inclusive, to affirm that we are chosen, given gifts to follow, not because of our CV or degrees or credentials or polling numbers or skill set. We are invited to follow because Jesus saw something in them, sees something in us, that is beyond our own capacity, except our capacity to drop what is for what may be.

Martin Luther King, Jr. articulated it this way: “Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

What will that look like? It will look like a lot of different things. ... Frederick Buechner’s well-known adage is on point: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Where is that place for you? Pay attention. Listen deeply. Follow.

And when we are not always able to discern that for ourselves, Jesus helps us. When we can’t see in ourselves the pathway to serve, Jesus does. When we can find no useful gifts within us, Jesus discovers and then uncovers them.

In a moment or two we will sing a new hymn – or at least new to us – by John Bell and Graham Maule, of the Iona Community in Scotland, set to a bouncy old pub tune, of all things. Pay attention to the text, perhaps pray it as a prayer after you leave this place. “Will you come and follow me if I but call your name? Will you go where you don’t know and never be the same?”

Jesus calls us by name. He didn’t call them by accident, nor us. And he knows already what we discover day by day. That to follow him, that to join in his transforming work, is to be transformed, to never be the same. That will make all the difference, as we seek to live our one wild and precious life with hope, with courage, with joy. Amen.