

Sermon: Called to Follow

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

22 January 2023

Based on **Psalm 27:1, 4-9; Matthew 4:12-23**

Years ago, I was filling in at a local church, and the Gospel reading had something to do with discipleship; I forget which passage. After the service, one of the congregants, an older man, came up to me and said, “So what you’re telling us is, we have to go out and do stuff?” Given his age and standing in the church, I was a little surprised that this seemed like a new concept to him. We talked about it, but I have no idea how he took the news.

We sometimes forget that Jesus is not our personal savior, dying on the Cross just for us. God sent the Son into the world in order that the *world* might be saved through him. Jesus came to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, beginning in Galilee. And while it is true that he would become known for safely tucking away 99 sheep in order to search for the lost one, he did that in order to return the one to the flock, to restore the community. Saving one saves all.

So, in the twenty-first century, how do we hear a reading such as today’s from Matthew, or last week’s similar but different reading from John? Why would Jesus ask any of us to walk away from everything we have and everything we know? How is that salvation?

To what does Jesus call us? Whatever it is, it’s probably nothing we planned for.

Matthew’s call story is different from John’s both in style and in the details. Why be different? We can’t really say. All we really know is that the two authors drew from material that helped them tell the story from their own perspective.

Last week, John the Baptist was part of the story; this week, he’s in jail. This is how Matthew chose to tell the story. Tradition says that Jesus only began his public ministry after John left the stage, so to speak, and that’s what we see here. So, we’ll honor the differences.

The first thing Jesus does is to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” The kingdom being God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. And some ancient manuscripts leave out ‘Repent,’ meaning Jesus might have simply said, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” And that could be a reference to Jesus himself preaching in Galilee.

Another difference is that here, Simon is already called Peter, whereas Jesus gave him that name in John's Gospel (1:34). And Jesus may very well have known or recognized Simon and Andrew, so calling them might not have come entirely out of the blue.

And it was a call. Jesus literally commanded them to "Come, follow me," and they did, immediately, without question. Same thing with James and John – they immediately dropped everything and left their father Zebedee to carry on by himself.

It's not an easy thing to abandon one's livelihood, especially when others depend on you to put food on the table. These men saw something in Jesus that offered them a new and better life, and it was worth giving up everything they had to pursue it. They saw something in Jesus which led them to upend their current way of life.

But off they went with him as his first disciples.

We are left to wonder about Zebedee and any other dependent members of their families. We're not told what they thought about this situation, but we can be sure there was some discussion around the dinner table that evening.

What was it about Simon and Andrew, James and John, that Jesus might think to call them as disciples? Matthew doesn't mention anything in particular, so we can only conclude one thing: they were there. They needed no other qualifications. These were just four, ordinary, hard-working guys. All they needed was Jesus to transform their lives.

It might have been a bad or even stupid decision for them to make, all things considered. But fear is something every disciple must overcome when they make the decision to follow Jesus. This is the cost of discipleship. And these four men didn't need to think twice. For better or worse, making the decision is the first step.

We too are called to follow. Jesus called his disciples in groups of two or three at a time, and that's the very definition of a congregation: a group of people assembled for religious worship, which is what following Jesus meant both then and now, because worship includes learning and doing and participation.

One scholar wrote that what Jesus offers is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, but we can't know that until we accept the call and leave the old life behind.

Jesus calls us to a new and different and better life. But must we abandon everything in order to do this? We would if Jesus himself were here to follow.

But today, we have only Jesus' teachings and his example to follow. He left us a roadmap. We can proclaim the good news of the kingdom, and we can cure every sickness among the people, according to our means and our gifts and our talents.

As a church, we have recently established an annual Outreach budget which we will use to support the International Child Fund; Wellspring Multi-Service Center in Hull and Weymouth; World Central Kitchen; Father Bill's & MainSpring in Brockton and Quincy; and End Hunger New England, which is a meal-packing program based in Pembroke.

Anyone can volunteer time and labor to help pack meals there that then get shipped all over New England and now even to Ukraine.

Anyone can make a financial donation to support any of these organizations.

As you know, we also support the Hingham Food Pantry with monthly food donations. As a church, these are the ways we have decided to show our love for our neighbors, even if we may never meet them.

So, for the congregant who once wondered if "we have to go out and do stuff," the answer is yes. To live in the house of the LORD all the days of our life means we have responsibilities and obligations to the community at large. The psalmist challenges us to think about God's presence among us in new and creative ways, just as Jesus once did on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and which we are doing here today, relying on God's grace.

Amen.