

Sermon, January 23, 2022

Matthew 4:18-22

“The Cost of Discipleship”

After being baptized, and going through the trials in the wilderness, Jesus was ready to begin his ministry, and as was usual, sought to call together a group of disciples. And so he walked down along the Sea of Galilee, and called two sets of brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John. All of them were fishermen, and he said that if they followed him, he would make them fishers of people. They put down their nets and followed. It seems odd that they would respond so quickly. There is no indication in Matthew’s Gospel that they had any previous knowledge of who Jesus was. Why do they just drop everything and follow someone they do not know?

Luke’s Gospel has a different version. Simon, and other fishermen had been out all night and caught nothing. Jesus comes along, gets into the boat, and tells them to head out to deep water. There they catch so many fish that their nets begin to break. Having seen this display of divine power they then decide to follow him.

You have to keep in mind that the gospel stories are not like newspaper accounts of specific events. That many parts are directed at those who will hear or read them and raise questions about their own spiritual lives and directions. One question that it might ask is why do you, or why will you, choose to follow Jesus? What is it about Jesus that leads you to be part of the Body of Christ?

Notice that in Matthew’s version he points out that James and John leave both their boat and their father behind to follow Jesus. In Luke’s version He specifically says, “they left everything and followed him.” They are informing us that choosing to follow Jesus is not to be taken lightly. That it entails sacrifice. Notice, also, that in Luke, Jesus doesn’t just say head out to sea. He tells them to go out to “deep water”. It’s there that they will catch the great net full of fish. I think it says something about the world he will send them out to catch many people. It also asks of us, what are we willing to sacrifice to follow Jesus? It reminds us of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer insists, that discipleship comes with a cost.

Notice, as well, who he calls. He doesn’t call the elite of his society - not the scribes, or Pharisees, or members of the Sanhedrin. He calls fishermen, and, eventually a man named Levi, also called Matthew, who was a tax collector, being among the most despised in that society. In Luke, Simon says, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!”, Jesus is not calling the righteous, or those who perceive themselves to be righteous. He is calling those who recognize that they fall short of the glory of God, those in need of redemption and the mercies of God, those who feel an empty space in their lives that needs to be filled, those who need to give their lives to a purpose greater than their selves.

What is your motivation? Theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, asks a very poignant and difficult question. Are you an admirer of Jesus, or are you a follower of Jesus? There’s a big difference.

If you follow through the gospels, especially the Synoptic Gospels, you find that the disciples were far from perfect. They were often confused, not sure of what they were seeing and hearing. I’m sure there were times when they asked themselves, ‘Why am I following this man?’ In the Gospel of Mark, it’s not until the eighth chapter that Peter realizes that Jesus is

the Messiah, but just as quickly is rebuked because he doesn't understand the way in which he is the Messiah. And all of those that Jesus called apostles followed him throughout his ministry, but all but one abandoned him as he hung on a cross. Yet, for all their confusion, for all their doubts, for their weaknesses, even for their acts of cowardice, Jesus did not cease to love them. After his resurrection he drew them to a mountain in Galilee and commissioned them to go out into the world to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and to teach all that he had commanded, and, promised to be with them to the end of the age!

And they did, and all but John would eventually pay the ultimate price being martyred for their faith. They had come to realize that discipleship comes with a cost, which they were willing to pay!

Jesus does not expect us to be perfect. Well, actually there is one instance when he tells us to be perfect, but what he meant was to be perfect in love. And he is not really looking for our admiration, but really does want us to follow, doing those things that he commanded, to care for the poor, to feed the hungry, to show compassion for the sick and dying, to be merciful and forgiving, to advocate for peace and justice, to love our neighbors as ourselves, even our enemies, and, in all things bear witness to the love of God.

Yesterday we lost a great advocate for both inner peace and world peace - Thich Nhat Hahn, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk. In his book "Living Buddha, Living Christ", he wrote, "When Jesus said, "I am the way", He meant that to have a true relationship with God, you must practice His way ... If you only satisfy yourself with praising a name, even the *name* of Jesus, it is not practicing the life of Jesus. We must practice living deeply, loving, and acting with charity if we wish to truly honor Jesus. The way is Jesus Himself and not some idea of Him." This goes back to what Hauerwas meant by following Jesus as opposed to simply admiring him. To study the life of Jesus, and to try to follow in his footsteps, is the truest pathway to a deeper relationship with God. Amen.

Let us pray: God, ever merciful and kind, we thank you for this day, and all the blessings that come with it. Help us to express our gratitude, by following your Son, Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life. Recognizing him as the way may we learn more deeply the ways of humility, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. May your Holy Spirit help us find inner peace, knowing that that is the first step towards achieving greater peace in our homes, our communities, our churches, and the world. We recognize and confess that there are things within ourselves that become stumbling blocks in the pathways Jesus set before us, but we know that in your mercy and grace we receive forgiveness and the opportunity to try again. Lead us Lord that through our words and our actions we reveal the depths of your love. Amen.