

## Called Out Matthew 4:12-23

Immediately Peter and Andrew left their nets and followed Jesus. Immediately James and John left their boat and their father and followed Jesus. The text is so stark, so bare of details. We are told nothing of the kind of struggle that might have gone on in the hearts of Peter, Andrew, James and John. According to Matthew, there wasn't any struggle. Without a tear or a backward glance, they got out of their boats, left their nets on the shore, said goodbye to their old dad, and took off with this strangely compelling itinerant preacher.

This story from the Gospel of Matthew has gained a certain romantic aura over the centuries. Think of all the beautiful brown toned paintings and pastel-tinted watercolors showing these quaint, rustic fishermen hauling in their heavy nets, suddenly distracted from their daily routine and changed forever by the commanding figure beckoning from the shore. It is the romance of the gospel, the promise of being summoned out of ordinary life to some deeper, richer, stranger experience. Yet Matthew is also letting us know, right off the bat, early in his gospel, that following Jesus is going to cost us something.

And yet – is it really supposed to cost us everything? Does following Jesus really mean we have to turn our backs on our families, our livelihood, and possessions the way those first disciples did?

I don't know if that is the right question to ask, but the fact is, for the first Christians, often it did mean exactly that. People lost their jobs or their social standing, marriages broke up, parents lost children, the authorities clamped down on this new religious movement that was threatening the stability of the Roman empire. As one preacher has suggested, Jesus Christ began by breaking the heart of James and John's father, Zebedee and proceeded in time to break the heart of the Roman world. Jesus and his gospel challenged all the old conceptions of the family and the state, and threatened the systems of privilege, patronage, and loyalty to the emperor. All of the values of the institutions that seemed to be fixed, unchangeable realities were called into question by the Christian vision of a new world order in which there would no longer be "slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female, because all are one in Christ Jesus."

After about 3 centuries things settled down. Christians lived more comfortably in the empire and the empire lived more comfortably with the Christians. Eventually Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire. After that, it became downright easy to profess the Christian faith, and hard for those who didn't.

Sometime during this period, the church started making distinctions among Christians. There were the Christians who became priests, monks and nuns – like those first disciples, they left their families behind, said no to the institutions of the state, and gave up their possessions in order to devote themselves full-time and whole-heartedly to worshiping and serving Christ.

The Church said that these Christians had special religious vocations, or callings, that set them apart from “ordinary” Christians. Not nearly as much was expected of the ‘ordinary’ Christians. By the time of the late middle ages, the only requirement the church imposed was that they attend weekly mass and take communion once a year. The church had far lower expectations of the laity than of the clergy, so what developed was a kind of two-tiered Christianity, divided between the ordinary churchgoers and the priests, monks, and nuns.

The Lutheran Reformation blasted to smithereens this idea of two-tier Christianity. Martin Luther left his monastery, married a nun, and boldly proclaimed that married Christians can serve God just as devotedly as celibate persons; that bakers and farmers and craftspeople can serve God just as well from within those occupations as monks and nuns and priests; and that changing a baby’s diaper is no more unworthy a task for a Christian than tending a monastery library or preaching a sermon. Every Christian, said Luther, is called to be a first-class Christian. Every Christian has a vocation – and that vocation is to serve Christ wholeheartedly in whatever occupation, station in life, or network of family relationships he or she has been placed.

That means that every one of us is called to submit our lives to the Lordship of Christ. The gospels give us no warrant for deciding that Jesus calls some of us to make a deep commitment and others to make a shallow, half-hearted commitment.

It may not be necessary for all Christians to leave possessions, occupations and families behind, but all of us are called to look at our own lives through the lens of the gospel of Jesus Christ and allow them to be shaped and transformed by the values of the kingdom Jesus came to announce. Christ calls each of us to a transformation of our existing relationships, work situations, social commitments, and political allegiances. In calling us, Jesus invites us into the new world of the kingdom of God and asks us to leave behind on the shore all that does not conform to the values of the kingdom.

What does it look like, here on the ground, to answer that high, demanding call? One thing to remember is that although Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John as individuals – he spoke to each one of them, and we can assume he spoke to each of them in a particular way they could respond to.

He called them together to form the basis of a new community. Jesus didn't summon them from their boats and then send them off in different directions or different missions. The little band of disciples formed a community right from the very beginning. They were already becoming the church. It was when Jesus began gathering his disciples that he began announcing the reign of God.

“Next to Jesus the disciples are the principal actors in the gospel drama.”  
Matthew has started the story of Jesus' ministry by identifying those who will carry it on after Jesus.

From the very beginning God has called and formed God's people into a community, a community that is set among all the peoples of the earth for the express purpose of serving God. That was the call of the covenant people of Israel; it was the call of Peter, Andrew, James and John, that first band of disciples; and it is the call that comes to us. Though there is no question that Christ may speak to each of us in deeply personal ways, his greater purpose is to bring us together as a community that can exhibit the kingdom of God to the world. This community is a new "family" constituted in the name of Jesus and under the sign of the reign of God. The word "ecclesiastical," by the way, "Pertaining to the church," comes from a Greek word that means "called out." We, the church of Jesus Christ, all of us, are the "called out" people of God.

Notice that we are "called out" rather than "called in." Peter, Andrew, James and John were not called just to hang with Jesus and enjoy his company. In the same way, we are not called together to be a cozy circle or a private club of like-minded people. We have a mission in the world. That mission is stated clearly at the end of Matthew's Gospel, in case we didn't get the metaphor of "fishing for people:" Matthew reminds us: "Go into the world and make disciples."

This clear command of our Lord makes most Lutherans uncomfortable. Say the words "evangelism committee" in most Lutheran churches, and people start coughing and looking in the direction of the doors.

We hear the word evangelism and think of those unwelcomed people who have showed up on our doorsteps asking if we have accepted Jesus Christ as our personal savior - if that is Christian mission, we want no part of it.

Certainly, there are other, better ways of “fishing for people,” especially in a technological society like ours, but the call to “go and make disciples” still tends to give most of us a bit of an anxiety attack.

And yet making disciples, “fishing for people,” is the church’s reason for existence. As the theologian Emil Brunner said, “The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning.” The call to gather others into the household of Christ is at the very core of who we are as the church.

The new church leaders who will be chosen later this morning will be charged with a variety of tasks having to do with running the church: maintaining the church building, overseeing the budget process, conducting a stewardship campaign, tending to the details of our worship services. But each and every member is primarily charged with obeying Christ’s clear summons to take his message of love, peace and justice into the world; to take him into the world in whatever we do. That is the reason for being the church. A church that becomes focused only on its inner life and its own survival is a church that has forgotten why it exists in the first place.

“Follow me,” Jesus says, and I will change your life. “Follow me,” and I will create out of you a new family, a new community held together by the love of God, a stronger bond even than the ties of birth and blood. “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people,” announcing to the world, in both word and action, the good news of the kingdom that comes in Jesus Christ.

You and I are the church – we are the church together. May God’s Spirit empower us to serve.

Amen.