

“From Lake, Boat, Fish, Net...Called”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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It was in an old historic Catholic church when I first heard the question verbalized to me about call. It was on a Friday night, about 8:00, and candles were lit all around the sanctuary. Above the altar was a huge cross with an ancient image of Jesus hanging on it. The question about call came with Jesus staring down at us. It was a little creepy. With 39 other seminary students present, we were asked to share stories of our calls to ministry. The stories that were shared that night were as similar and, yet, distinct as they could possibly be. I only remember two of those many stories—one that was quite unique with much detail, and the other that was somewhat general and slightly mundane.

First is the unique story. A woman in our class told of a tragic farm accident that she was involved in some years prior, when she fell off the farm tractor and was run over by the rear wheels. Both of her legs were broken, and her knees were crushed. It was assumed by the doctors that she would never walk again, but while in the hospital she experienced a miracle—a miracle in which her knees were mysteriously healed, and the doctors determined that, once her broken legs were healed she would, indeed, walk again, and probably even resume her normal life just as if the accident had never taken place, but she, through that whole experience, was convinced that her life would never be the same again because, in her miraculous healing experience, she was certain that God had chosen her for a special life of ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. God had called her by name through the healing miracle of her knees.

Now, the second, slightly more mundane, story was shared by a number of students (me being one of them), and this story was about a call emanating, not from a miraculous healing event but this story was about calls to ministry from a God who slowly, but surely, hounded people—that is, a God who hounded people until they could no longer escape God’s call upon their lives. They had run from this call. They had denied this call. They had ignored this call. They had argued with God about this call; but, in the end, when all those efforts at resisting God’s call had run out of gas and they could run no more, they applied to seminary and were off.

When I was struggling with my call, I went to an Episcopal priest, and I wanted to get some feedback and some direction. I said to the Episcopal priest “You know, I think I’m going to go to seminary”. He looked at me and said “You know, it’s a necessary evil”.

Well, in our readings from the Gospel of Mark this morning, we encounter the call of the first five disciples, all of whom hesitate not one bit when Jesus calls to them. Jesus sees Simon and his brother, Andrew, fishing. They are literally throwing their nets into the sea. Jesus invites them to follow and says “I will make you fish for people”. The text says that, in response to that invitation, they immediately left their nets and followed him.

The story goes on. Next, Jesus sees James and John, sons of Zebedee. They are in their boats mending their nets, and Jesus calls to them. They immediately leave their father and some hired men, who are there in the boats working with them and they, too, follow Jesus.

Then, there is that call of Levi, and it is really not much different. Jesus is out again by the sea. He’s got a crowd around him, and he’s teaching, and he sees Levi there, who is working at a tax booth. Levi worked for Rome. Jesus says to him “Follow me”, and he gets up and he follows, with not a moment of hesitation. He leaves his governmental job. He leaves his health insurance. He leaves his pension to follow this itinerant preacher and teacher by the name of Jesus.

What I notice about these call stories is that they are presented as if there is not even a moment of doubt on behalf of the disciples about whether or not to follow Jesus. It’s strange because the first

set of brothers, Simon and Andrew, are not just going to follow Jesus but, in following Jesus, they are also leaving their business—that is, they are leaving their source of life, their source of income. They are leaving behind that which gives them life, and James and John are leaving their business, too, but they are also leaving their father—that is, they are leaving their family behind, so in these texts, it seems as though that work and family are left behind in about an instant, all to follow this Jesus guy. As I read over these, I thought to myself, what could be so compelling to make these guys leave in a moment's notice.

It is stories like these about call that cause us to reflect on our own lives. There are, to my understanding, two critical elements that must be present in order for the call of God to be so compelling. First, of course, is the vision of the call that is being offered. Jesus didn't just say "Follow me". Jesus was teaching, and he was telling people about this vision, and Jesus was saying to folks, come follow me, and I am going to show you a new way to live. Come follow me and I am going to show you a whole new set of values that are very different from the culture around you. Come follow me into this new community of faith and here is what happens in this new community of faith. We all take care of each other. That is what we do in this community, and come follow me into this new vision into the world and community—a community where everyone, women and children, male and female, everyone is valued as a child of God.

So, through parable, story and example, Jesus lived out this vision and invited others to it. We can only imagine from the text and from the way it is shared, this quick, sort of, "I will follow" response from the disciples, that Jesus was capturing their imagination for the way the world can be organized in a different way and that they must have been very, very excited about this vision.

Now, the second critical element that must be present for the call of God to be received and acted upon, as it was by these disciples, is an absolute dissatisfaction with life as it is currently ordered. These disciples must have wanted a change.

What the Gospels don't tell us about in this situation is that they lived in a time when there was great turmoil and change going on. In fact, all historians say that, at the time when Jesus was alive, the Roman Empire was, in fact, taking over the Jewish homeland, and they were taking it over in every possible way. There were ports being built. There were bridges being built. There were roads being built. There was infrastructure being built as far as the eye could see, and there were towns like the town of Sepphoris that did not cooperate with Rome, that was simply ransacked and burnt to the ground. All of this change was coming upon little people like the fishermen in the call stories. Their lives were being turned upside down. Their families were being broken up. Their economic supports were being challenged. So, in the Sea of Galilee (which is where all these call stories sort of take place, or around it and, by the way, the Sea of Galilee was an inland lake, a freshwater lake that was 13 miles long, 8 miles wide and had a shoreline of 33 miles), what was happening to the Sea of Galilee (this place where generations and generations of fisher families had lived for years and worked for years) Rome was commercializing that lake. They were commercializing that lake. They were commercializing that fish, and they were leaving all those fisher families disrupted and under the Roman tax burden, so they were not happy with what was going on. They were ready for a new vision of how we can live our lives. So, throughout the Jewish homeland of that time, those who did not "dance to the tune of Rome" were simply disposed of like Jesus on the cross. So, the call to those disciples, first of all, lifted up an alternative vision of how our lives can be ordered and spoke to the dissatisfaction that was so real for people in that first century in Palestine. When those two things are longing for something different, and there is a dissatisfaction with the way things are coming together, the disciples said yes, we will follow.

Now, I want to suggest this morning that God's call to us in our day is not that much different from 2000 years ago. We are today, through Christ, offered a new way of living. It is a way very different from the dominant values of our culture. Today our culture can be defined by rabid competition, debt-creating consumerism, violence, hatred of all kinds, greed, and an individualism that leaves many of us lonely and isolated.

Just this week you may have heard that story of the man in that Tampa movie theater, who shot dead another man over an argument about texting. What kind of world is it that we live in where we kill each other over texting? We need a new vision for our lives, for our world, and Jesus has been coming forward to say, here is a new way to live.

So, it is a call to each one of us here today, and the question is how bad do we want it, how badly do we want to live our lives differently, what are we willing to risk for this new life, what are we willing to leave behind, and what, of the enticements of this world, are we willing to give up.

The universal call of Jesus is, on one hand, very simple. It is "follow me", but where that call takes us is something altogether different. It is a call to each one of us individually, but it is a call that we respond to together, and my sense is that if we listen very carefully, if our eyes are wide open for the signs of God around us, if our souls are receptive to the movement of God's holy spirit, we, too, will realize that God is hounding us, that God is, in fact, chasing us down because God wants a relationship with each one of us, and God wants us to find ways to commit to a new life, a new world and a new way of living. So, God is, in fact, calling out to us. God is just simply saying "Follow me". God continues to pursue us, calling us to this new community and we, like those first disciples, are simply called to say yes, we will follow. Thanks be to God for the call of Jesus Christ who calls us into community and calls us out into the world to share that vision of how we can live. Thanks be to God. Amen.