

Would You Follow this Fellow?

Matthew 4:12-23

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Churches of Portland and Decatur, Indiana on January 22, 2017]

I

One of the most beloved American poems is “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost.

The poem has been a favorite of mine ever since high school when our choir sang composer Randall Thompson’s setting of Frost’s immortal words.

No doubt many of you feel as I do about this poem.

In the poem, Frost speaks as a traveler walking through the woods who comes to a fork in the road.

He looks down one path and then looks down the other.

One appears to be more trodden down than the other.

And so the traveler has to decide: which direction do I go?

In the final stanza, the poet speaks powerfully about the crucial moment of decision, when he has to decide which path to take.

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

II

The story of our Christian faith begins with a young man who leaves his home,
sets out on an adventure,
and takes the road *less traveled by*.

It is such an inconspicuous detail in the narrative that you can easily miss it.

Matthew says simply

“Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea.”

Think of the circumstances that lie behind that simple statement.

A young man about thirty years old,
 working in his family’s carpenter shop,
 responsible for the care of his widowed mother and his younger
 brothers and sisters,
 announces one day that he’s leaving...
 leaving the business of carpentry,
 leaving the security of a regular income,
 leaving the care of his family.

It is one small detail in the narrative, but it contains enormous implications for what it means to follow Jesus of Nazareth,
 the one who for 2000 years has been worshiped and proclaimed by
 Christians as Savior and Lord.

Jesus answered the call of his heavenly Father and we, too, are called to follow this fellow who took the road *less traveled* by.

We don't know how much time elapsed between Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his ministry in Galilee.

Whether it was right after his forty days of his wilderness temptation or several months thereafter,

Matthew tells us that it was not until John the Baptist had been arrested that Jesus took up his work,
 stepping into the void created by John's imprisonment.

Upon learning of John's arrest, Jesus moves his base of operations to Capernaum, a successful fishing village located on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee.

For Matthew, this is neither coincidence nor convenience, but one more instance in Jesus' life that had been foretold by the prophets and which reveals Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises and purpose.

And so, once again, Matthew underscores this point by quoting Isaiah 9:

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in the land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.*

Jesus has taken up residence in Galilee of the Gentiles,
to bring light to those sitting in darkness.

John had prepared the way and completed his work.

Jesus has taken the road *less traveled by* and now his work begins.

III

Then Jesus begins to proclaim,
"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Notice that Jesus' words are precisely the same as John's,
at least on the surface.

But look beyond the words to what follows and it becomes clear that,
though the words are the same,
Jesus' message is quite different.

For John, to *repent* had to do with the forgiveness of sin,
confessing and being baptized with water for repentance in order to flee
from the wrath that was to come.

But Jesus says nothing about confessing sin,
nothing about expressing remorse for forgiveness,
and nothing about the coming wrath.

The repentance Jesus proclaims is a call to a different kind of action.

"Repent" here means to turn...

to change...
to be transformed by the in-breaking of God's kingdom.

It means a change of heart,
a change of values,
a change of mind,
a change of commitments,
a change of life's direction,
not because wrath is on the way,
but because the kingdom of heaven—
the reign of God—
is at hand.

When Jesus says "repent," it's not just a command but also an invitation.

It invites the listener to turn away from a course of action and choose a new (and better) pathway.

This call to repent suggests that no one is beyond the reach of redemption and that all of us can choose a different path.

God's reign is near at hand and so a decision must be made.

Jesus is saying that, because the reign of God has broken into life,
people can embrace God's reign and find new life.

That is what Jesus means by "repent."

Jesus is talking about what Pastor Rick Warren called *The Purpose Driven Life*.

"Get yourself a new orientation for the way you live, and then act on it."

The Giver of life is here!

In the vernacular of our day: "Get a life!"

The presence and power of God are here,
unfolding and claiming life for God's purposes.

So Jesus says, now is the time to **get a life!**

IV

Then Jesus approaches the brothers we met last week—

Peter and Andrew—

and very simply says to them,

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

Preachers and New Testament scholars have wondered for centuries whether Peter and Andrew had previously met Jesus—

had they ever had a conversation with him that led up to this moment.

Or did his invitation to them come totally out of the blue?

We don't know the answer, but I can picture the scene in my mind:

Waist deep in the Sea of Galilee,

Peter and Andrew were dutifully going about their business,

casting their nets...

hauling in the catch.

From all appearances in this and other places in the gospels, they were rather good at it—they were probably successful, middleclass business people.

I know; you've heard all that romantic stuff about "poor, illiterate fishermen."

But a look at what we know about them and the socio-economic circumstances of the day tells a different story.

Fishing was, and is, a major industry on the Sea of Galilee.

Capernaum was a thriving town on one of the major trade routes, the *Via Maris* that went south to Egypt and north to Damascus.

These first disciples owned the necessary equipment,

nets and boats,

to support themselves and their families.

Scholars tell us that they were likely no different than other successful middle class business people of the day.

They were probably moderately well-educated and certainly not illiterate.

So there they are,
 tending to their business,
 when, apparently, out of the blue,
 the new rabbi in town tells them to drop what they are doing
 and follow him.

Now rabbis did not do that sort of thing.

They did not choose their students,
 it was the other way around;
 students chose their rabbis.

But these are not would-be rabbinic students.

 They are fishermen.

 And this is more than a rabbi.

They are to give up a life of catching fish and come with Jesus to engage in the work of catching people.

It is a reminder to us that it is people whom God prizes,
 people who God pursues,
 people who God loves and values.

Other human beings may write them off as not worth the effort,
 as enemies because of their behavior,
 their opinions,
 or their practices,

But God sees them—
 indeed God sees all of us,
 all human beings,
 as worthy of love and as redeemable.

V

Matthew tells us, "Immediately they left their nets and followed him."

Matthew gives no indication that they had met Jesus before,
much less any idea what this "fishing for people" might mean.

Nor is there any suggestion that Peter and Andrew were unhappy with their lives as fishermen and were anxious to try something new.

No, there is something greater and deeper going on here:
the reign of God has broken in.

The kingdom of God is present in the person of Jesus,
who first invites Peter and Andrew,
and then James and John, the sons of Zebedee,
to join with him in doing God's work.

Immediately these four fishermen change course,
have a change of mind
a change of heart,
a change of commitment,
because the power of God has broken into their lives.

They have been called to something they would never choose for themselves,
by One who speaks with an authority they simply cannot question.

This is what happens when Jesus calls us to follow him.

Sometimes we know this in a moment, as did Peter and Andrew.

We can't explain it.

It has come out of the blue while we were waist deep in minding our own business.

We simply know it is true and we must do something about it.

We must take the road "less traveled by."

But more often than not, Jesus' call to follow him works itself out over a period of time.

Sometimes it seems like the most plausible and natural thing expected—

like when I, as a teenager, 16 years old, was invited to give the youth Sunday sermon in my home church.

I was overwhelmed with the love, support, and affirmation of the members of the congregation, and my mother said it seemed to her like the pulpit was the place where I belonged (and I hope it still is).

At other times, it seems totally implausible, almost absurd.

We may have grown up in a community of Christ's followers all our lives.

We may have heard this story of the disciples answering Jesus' call.

We may even have wished and wondered what it would be like for us to be waist deep in the Sea of Galilee so Jesus could say directly to us,
"Follow me."

But that is not possible, yet, we continue to choose to follow him.

We choose to be present where his Word is proclaimed—
where we do hear him say "Follow me"—
and where he gives us the gift of himself through the sacraments of
Communion and baptism.

We choose to hold Jesus' values before us as norms which challenge us and stretch us and cause us to wonder if anyone is really capable of living up to his teachings.

But we keep coming back, and continue to choose not to turn away.

Then one day we awaken to the fact that another choosing has been taking place all along:

we thought we were searching,
when in fact, we were being sought.

We thought we were choosing,
when in fact, we were being caught.

Suddenly, "Follow me," has new meaning, and now we must follow this fellow who comes out of the blue to call us to a change of direction, a change of life.

Albert Schweitzer famously wrote:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands, and to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal Himself in the toil, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

That is what happened to Peter and Andrew,
to James and John.

This is what has happened to every follower ever since,

whether St. Augustine
or St. Francis of Assisi,

Dorothy Day,

Billy Graham,

Frederick Buechner,

Thomas Merton,

Millard Fuller,

or any anonymous John Doe

or Mary Smith.

Jesus calls them to himself; they follow and take up lives of discipleship.

This is what it means to follow this fellow from Nazareth.

The word Matthew uses when telling us they followed him is the technical term in the New Testament for discipleship.

Following Jesus is about more than believing something about him,
more than just agreeing with his basic principles or precepts of his life and teachings about life and how it should be lived.

It is about the discipline of shaping our lives after the pattern of his life—
the discipline of worship,
the discipline of prayer,
the discipline of generosity,
the discipline of service,

the discipline of forgiveness—
 even when it would be easier, more comfortable, and perhaps even more successful
 to follow another, or to be our own master.

But as yet, Peter and Andrew and James and John have no idea where this journey
 will take them.

They only know they must follow this fellow,
 no matter what the future may hold.

VI

**Would you follow this fellow who comes to your out of the blue and says,
 “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people”?**

What does that mean, fish for people?

Sounds kind of impersonal doesn't it—like notches on our belt.

If we press the phrase too hard it can become an unattractive metaphor that points
 to the entrapment of the vulnerable or taking advantage of another's hardship and
 suffering.

That is not what Jesus meant by “fish for people.”

As we talked last week, evangelism is about process not product.

It is about *noticing* how God is at work in our lives
 and the lives of those around us,
sharing the good news of God's love for us in Christ,
 and *inviting* others to journey with us.

It is not about leveraging others so we can count, much less claim, to have saved
 their souls.

The only one who saves souls in this world, after all, is God,
 who did that in the cross of Jesus Christ,
 revealing soul-saving love for all of us.

When Jesus uses the image “fish for people,”
 he is talking to fishermen,

telling them that if they follow him,
 the purpose of their lives
 the focus of their lives,
 the commitment of their lives will change.

Seminary professor Anna Carter Florence has taken the metaphor and expanded it to all sorts of occupations:

Follow me, you miners, and I will make you mine for people!

Follow me, you farmers, and I will make you farm for people!

Follow me, you bankers and tellers, and I will make you bank human life!

Follow me, you builders, and I will make you builders of God's house!

Follow me, you shopkeepers, and I will make you keepers of God's shop!

Follow me, you clowns and fools, and I will make you fools for God!

Follow me, you landscape workers, and I will make you landscapers of life!

Follow me, you seamstresses and tailors, and I will make you sew our lives as well as our garments!

Follow me, you cooks and chefs and butchers and bakers, and I will make you season and leaven and serve and preserve more than food!

Follow me, you insurance agents, and I will make you insure God's agency!

Follow me, you instrumentalists, and I will make you instrumental to others!

Follow me, you educators, and I will teach you to inspire the soul as well as the mind!

(Added by me after a retired teacher brought the omission of educators to my attention)

*Follow me, you friends, you parents, you children, you siblings, you neighbors, you strangers, you hosts and guests,
 and I will make you all these things—
 to every other human being!*

The call of this fellow Jesus always starts where we already are.

Our response is to take a deep breath,
take the road *less traveled by*,
and follow.

That will make all the difference.

Amen.

Sources:

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