

Sermon File # 1119

Scripture Text: Matthew 4:18-22

Sermon Title: *Jesus' Call to Follow Him*

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Jesus' Call to Follow Him

Introduction:

Today we have been privileged to observe and celebrate the baptism of two young adults, who have given their verbal as well as symbolic testimony of their new life in Christ. Baptism is a witness to unbelievers of the death and resurrection of Christ, and of the spiritual death and resurrection of these new believers. But this beautiful symbol also is a reminder to all of us who profess faith in Christ of our commitment to follow Jesus in a new way of Kingdom living. In order to examine and reconsider what it means for us to follow Christ, I want us to look in our Bibles to Matthew's account of Jesus' call to his first disciples.

In the third and fourth chapters of his Gospel, Matthew gives us a look at the ministry of John the Baptist (or "Baptizer," perhaps a more descriptive term that dissociates him from a particular denomination!). John was called to prepare the way for Jesus, whom he baptized at the inaugural moment to begin his public ministry. Jesus then passed the testing period of his temptation by Satan in the wilderness. After this preparation, Jesus began to preach that the Kingdom of God is accessible to all who would obey his command to repent, that is, turn from self and sin and believe in him as Lord and Savior. Jesus was not to do his ministry of preaching alone, but called disciples, that is, followers who learned from him and ministered with him. Note in

our text the call of Jesus to these disciple-learner/followers, which is the call he gives to us today:

Read **Matthew 4:18-22**.

I have read, heard and even preached so much during my ministry career about Jesus' call to discipleship that I have allowed the implications of his call to fade into near irrelevance for me personally. I must ever be on guard against the sin of laying burdens on the backs of others that I myself am unwilling to bear (Luke 11:46). I must be sure when I preach about Jesus' call to follow him that I too am listening to his call and willing to hear and consider the challenge to obey.

Often through the church's preaching, teaching and religious vocabulary, we layer over and thus obfuscate the clear words of Jesus with our own interpretations and traditions. When we hear "call" or "calling to discipleship" we're likely to associate these words with a vocational calling to ministry in the church or through missionary service. And indeed, there are special callings in the gospels and in the kingdom of God today. In our text, Jesus was calling the inner circle of his disciples, three of whom would become leaders in the earliest church after Jesus ascension back into heaven. But as Matthew relates this call of Jesus, he intends for all of his readers to consider that God calls each of us to a lifetime of following, learning and apprenticeship in Kingdom living and serving.

As I studied this text, I came to see that Jesus called these disciples much like a military commander would issue a command to his troops (E Lohmeyer, quoted by Lane, 69, footnote). It certainly would not have been a pious sounding, churchy cliché that Jesus would have spoken. One commentator translates Jesus' words in verse 19 as, "Come on! After me!" (Nolland, 179). I suggest that today, right here in this worship center, the living Christ walks among us and is saying to all of us, and not just to the two who were baptized today, "Come on! After me!" And each one of us must decide what we will do with his call, his command.

This was not a precipitous command. In all likelihood, these four men who were given this call had answered his call to be with him and even possibly had accompanied Jesus during his first year in his three to three-and-a-half year public ministry (John 1:35-51). They had the opportunity to know Jesus personally, but now the time had come to commit to follow him in serious discipleship, which would require a price to pay and a disciplined life of following him, as they would share in his trials and conform to a cruciform life (France, 104). And so this call comes to each one of us today, and I pray we will hear it in a fresh way.

Hear him as in our text Jesus gives...

The reasons for his call

In 4:17, we see that Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming the arrival and accessibility of the Kingdom of God ("kingdom of heaven," in Matthew, which was a concession to his Jewish readership, who refused even to write out the word "God." See Yancey, page 835). The incarnation of the eternal Son of God was the plan of

God to bring a lost world back into relationship with himself. Jesus came preaching the gospel, but also, as we see in the next verse, 18, that he chose to call others to join him in this task to take his rescue message to...

A world in need

For Jesus to proclaim the accessibility of his kingdom means that God desires to bring a lost world back into relationship with himself. From before the creation of the world God knew that a lost and broken world would need his rescue, and his plan was to send his Son through his miraculous birth on a mission of seeking that which was lost (Luke 19:10). This is the truth of John 3:16, that God loved this lost and dying world so much that he sent his one-of-a-kind Son into the world for us. And the purpose of his taking upon himself the likeness of our sinful flesh was to become our sin-bearing Savior. His death on the cross was the primary reason for his life on the earth (John 12:27f).

And Jesus' purpose was to call others to tell his saving message and be agents of his saving work even after his death, resurrection and ascension back into heaven. Jesus called his first disciples and he continues to call his followers to this day because of...

A loving, longing and worthy God

Jesus called people to repent, not because he was eager to condemn them. In fact, he said that he did not come to condemn us for the simple reason that when he came we were hopelessly condemned already because of our sin and unbelief (John 3:17). He came, rather, to rescue us and give us a way of escape from condemnation caused by our sin.

Jesus called people into a personal, life-changing, God-worshipping, love-relationship with him. God created us for a relationship with himself and our sin and self-centered rebellion has separated us from him. As theologian Alister McGrath says, "we have been created to exist in relationship—with one another and with God." And "no human being can rest satisfied with an abstract and impersonal world. We need to relate to others—including God." McGrath explains, "Christianity is a fundamentally *relational* faith. We must never think of the gospel in purely rational terms—for example, believing there is a God, as if faith was simply assent to a list of propositions." And McGrath gives the example the first disciples of Jesus as examples of those called primarily into a personal relationship with him (116f).

God created the universe and us for his glory and honor, and his desire is to be worshiped by his creation and especially his people made in his image. As Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman, the Father in heaven seeks after worshipers (John 4:23). Jesus calls disciples to love and worship him and to join him in his rescue mission and in the Father's mission to recruit worshipers for his everlasting kingdom.

Jesus called his first disciples and he calls us because he desires an everlasting love relationship with us. This is a wonder of his grace, that Jesus should want our love

and fellowship, not only now but for all eternity (John 17:20-26). We need to realize the inestimable privilege, that Jesus invites us to follow and be with him forever.

The call to follow is made, as to these first disciples, with...

The authority of Christ

Jesus spoke to these disciples with his ultimate authority as Lord of all. This was one of the striking aspects of Jesus' ministry. Although he came to us in all humility, lowliness and the unpretentiousness of a Galilean peasant, when Jesus spoke, his message resounded with authority. Those he addressed recognized something of God's authority in his voice and in his teaching which was lacking in the ostentatious pronouncements of the religious authorities (Mark 1:22; Matthew 7:29).

Jesus spoke with the authority of God because he was God incarnate, a claim that critical unbelievers could not accept or even tolerate. And with that divine authority, Jesus took the initiative in calling his disciples to abandon other competing commitments to follow him in absolute surrender and unqualified obedience (Wilkins, 185ff). Jesus spoke like a commanding officer, and those who believed in him realized that to demur or even hesitate would be an act of high treason. Do we also hear the voice of the one who created all and is Lord over all and whose reign someday shall be acknowledged by all?

And so we hear in our text the authoritative voice of Jesus as he issues next...

The requirements of his call

Although we know that Jesus spent all night in prayer before he selected his 12 disciples (Luke 6:12f), the criteria he used seemed almost indiscriminant. He didn't look for followers who had a theological education or even much formal training of any kind. Although the first disciples certainly were not ignoramuses or underachievers, they nevertheless were regarded by the religious elite as "unschooled and ordinary men" (Acts 4:13). Jesus sought after the ordinary so that, in the words of the Apostle Paul, he would thereby show the world that the extraordinary power of the kingdom is from God and not from human ability (1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5). In the same way Jesus today calls us ordinary people...

To be with him

Jesus had already introduced himself to these disciples and it's possible that they had been with him for as long as a year, watching him minister and hearing him teach (John 1:35-51). Yet now was the time for them to draw nearer in a closer love-relationship of total commitment to Jesus. To follow Jesus would demand that they now accept responsibility in sharing his mission and prepare to continue his work after his eventual ascension.

I pray that I am resolved to know Jesus in a closer love and trust relationship, hopefully drawing nearer to the aspiration of the apostle Paul, who said that his desire was to know Christ in a deeper, more satisfying and life-changing relationship.

But the longer I live and observe the lives of those who yearn to know Christ in a deeper way, I realize what a dangerous objective this is. Paul linked his expression of desire in knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection with the necessity of “the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” and “becoming like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10).

To follow Jesus, to walk in his steps, means to take up our cross daily, which is the cruciform life of saying “no” to self-centered, self-directed lives and a willingness to share in Jesus’ reproach, rejection and suffering (Luke 9:23 & 1 Peter 2:21). The more we live consciously of his presence the more of his character becomes our character, his virtues our virtues. As we abide in him as a branch abides in the vine, the more of the fruit of the Spirit flows from our lives (John 15:1ff; Galatians 5:22f). And, in order to draw us closer to his loving presence, our heavenly Father will give Satan a longer tether (Job 1:6ff) in order to test, refine and strengthen us in him (Hebrews 12:4ff). He may allow some of our cherished and even godly dreams to be shattered to draw us yet closer to his love (Crabb, 1ff)

To follow Jesus means not only that we live in communion with Jesus but also that we are in close fellowship with his people. As these disciples, later to be joined by eight others, were called together as well as to follow Jesus, so are we called into a local fellowship, the church of Jesus, the Body of Christ on earth. We cannot be his followers without being drawn to and even mutually dependent on others. This is true for our fellowship with Christ and also for his calling to us...

To bring along others

Fishing was a joint venture, a team effort, and Jesus told these disciples that he would send them out to fish for people just as they had been fishing for fish for their livelihood (19). This call of Jesus to fish for others might well have reminded Matthew’s Jewish readers of Jeremiah 16:16, when the Lord spoke of sending “fishermen” to gather the Israelites for exile (Carson, 119). But Jesus called his followers, not to gather people for judgment, but to gather them into his kingdom, reaching them for grace, faith, forgiveness and everlasting salvation.

To fish for others was a metaphor that spoke clearly to these fishermen and not so vividly for us. These men knew all about the work of fishing, and that it required hard work, persistence, courage, patience, skill, teamwork, alertness and faith, since they could not see the fish! (Wiersbe, 31). In a vivid, life-action parables, Jesus demonstrated to the disciples their absolute dependence on him when he gave them miraculous catches of fish (Luke 5:1-11; John 21:1-14). So, joining Jesus in his kingdom work as his missional people, of bringing others to faith that they become his worshipers, requires our absolute dependence on his divine power. And it requires that we join with God’s people in this endeavor.

Fishing in Lake Galilee was and still is a team effort, throwing overboard a heavy net, weighted at the four corners with heavy weights, that allow the nets to descend over a large catch of fish that requires a mighty effort to bring again to the surface. So, don’t think of fishing for men as being analogous to your sitting under a shade tree on a lazy riverbank, dangling your worm on a hook from your cane pole. We need each other and especially we need God’s grace, strength, wisdom and protection.

William Barclay quotes a prayer from an old Greek who prayed for the protection of the gods:

“My boat is so small and the sea is so large” (Barclay, 73)

And so for us as well, to be involved in kingdom work is to acknowledge that we can do nothing without the grace, power, wisdom and love of the Lord Jesus (John 15:5). And one thing that I have learned if nothing else—I am helpless and useless in the kingdom of God apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. And I know that the “sea” where we are called to fish, namely Belgium and wherever God places you, requires his power, wisdom and anointing for a successful catch of “fish.”

As one well-known African American preacher says in his colorfully inimitable way, Jesus has called us to be fishers of people, but we have instead settled for being keepers of an aquarium (EV Hill, as quoted by Wilkins, 189).

Jesus used this analogy of fishing for people because these first disciples were fishermen. But he might use a different analogy for you in following him. If you're in diplomatic service, he would call you to make peace between others and God. If you're a civil engineer, he might say you are to make bridges of reconciliation between the un-reconciled and a forgiving God. If you're a domestic, he might call you to serve the needs of the unconverted that they might come to know Jesus as the Chief Servant of all. You who are military personnel, Jesus is calling you to be a soldier of the cross and to overcome the Enemy and take the unconverted as “captives” for the Kingdom of God.

And “fishing for men” or building bridges for people are not analogies just for what we might consider to be overt evangelistic preaching and witnessing. It involves the entire work and expression of the good news of Jesus, which includes his work of teaching, preaching, and making people whole, i.e. ministering to the physical and emotional needs of people as well as the spiritual. In the following verses in Matthew 4 (23-25), we have a good portrait of this holistic ministry of Jesus, who brought good news to every area of human life.

And the call of Jesus requires us...

To forsake preoccupations and obstacles

Even though Jesus' call to these two sets of brothers was preceded by perhaps a year of acquaintance with him, his messiah-ship and his ministry, it was now presented to them as an abrupt demand and dramatic interruption to their lives, livelihood and relationships. Jesus was calling them to forsake their preoccupations and any other obstacles to following him unreservedly. For them it meant leaving behind the family business, which we can assume was successful. It also meant forsaking their partnership with their father and, we can assume, other family and community relationships.

Gregory the Great (540-604) noted that the kingdom of heaven has no price tag on it; it's worth as much as you have to give. For Zacchaeus, it cost him half of his

earthly goods; It cost these disciples their fishing business, Matthew his tax collecting enterprise and the widow, her two mites—all she had to live on (Luke 19:8; Matthew 9:9; Luke 21:1-4). God's kingdom "is worth as much as you have" (Gregory, 73).

Have you ever "window-shopped" in a very expensive store that didn't have price tags on anything? The underlying message was, "If you have to ask the price, you can't afford it." And in some ways that's like the cost of following Jesus. If we have to ask, perhaps we're not ready. At least that's true if we're bargain shopping. Jesus doesn't offer any bargains or discounts. He does, however, expect us to measure and carefully consider the cost (Luke 14:25-33). But, as the rich young man discovered, Jesus will always ask us to relinquish whatever has control of our loyalties.

I cannot say what Jesus will ask you to forsake in order to follow him. I'm not even sure for myself what the price will be or even if I am even now paying the full price he is asking of me. I know that in recent months I have had to relinquish some plans and hopes for my life and ministry in the confidence I am following Jesus. I do know that God allows no other "gods" before him (Exodus 20:3), even the god of ministry plans and identity, and the Lordship of Christ means he takes first place and has the authority to give to us and take from us as he will. Nothing and no one must stand between us and our freedom to follow and obey him.

Probably for most of us following Jesus will not necessitate our changing occupations or even our address. But it will mean changing our preoccupation with self-centered objectives and making the advancement of God's kingdom the top priority of our lives. However, if giving Jesus and his kingdom and glory first place is impossible to do in our current job and personal entanglements, some overt changes will be necessary in order to follow him.

I realize that for me to follow Jesus in unqualified and unhesitating obedience, I must give up some doubts and fears about the future. When I try to do 'long-range planning' in my mind, nothing seems to make sense or appear possible. For me, to follow Jesus means I must stop trying to plan things for God or try to peer into his future for me. I simply must give up the obstacle of doubt, fear and anxiety. Only when I jettison the obstacle of anxiety and distrust will I know the joy of following Jesus in a close, love relationship.

But I think we need to pause and think about the benefits of following Jesus. Just for starters we can say that the life of following Jesus is one of knowing and enjoying a soul-satisfying relationship with Jesus. These four disciples, perhaps during their year of being with Jesus, had realized the joy of his presence and were willing to relinquish the lesser joys of a self-directed life without him. I think at this point of a comment by AW Tozer, who noted somewhere that for him it was no sacrifice to "give up" a life working in an Akron (Ohio, USA) rubber plant, living a mundane existence of eking out a living, to answer the call to be God's servant, which he did in a brilliant way. We shouldn't think of the life of following Jesus as the throwing away of life but rather as the discovery of a full and meaningful life that only God can give us (John 10:10; Matthew 10:39)

How do we know if we are following Jesus? Only if we can say that Jesus is Lord over our relationships, our jobs, our finances, our family life, and our free time can we have assurance we are following him. The obedience of these disciples stands in marked contrast with the fickle crowd, who came only to be “blessed” by Jesus, as he mercifully fed them and preformed miracles before them. When Jesus began to talk with them about a costly life of commitment to a life-changing relationship, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.” But Peter and the others who continued to follow Jesus understood that a life of following Jesus was the only option for eternal life (John 6:66-69).

Following Jesus is the only way to experience his joy, rest and peace. Whether you have never begun to follow Jesus, or even if you are a long-time follower, Jesus invites you to follow him in a love and serving relationship that yokes you with him and brings rest to your soul (Matthew 11:28-30).

And thus we see in the call of Jesus to follow him...

The response to his call

As noted earlier, Jesus sought the Father’s will in calling his disciples. Yet, his selection obviously wasn’t based on any prior qualifications or credentials on their part. They indeed were ordinary working men, men that Jesus knew would be willing to follow, whose lives were interrupted abruptly by Jesus’ call, which was...

Immediate

“At once (Peter and Andrew) left their nets and followed him” (20). And “immediately (James and John) left the boat and their father and followed him” (22). When Jesus called they obeyed. The time comes when action is required. Even to delay is to disobey. The call of God will never come at a time of personal convenience to us, but will always seem to be a rude, even unwelcome interruption.

Look at the biblical examples, of Gideon, who was called while busily threshing wheat (Judges 6:11ff); Elisha was occupied with plowing (1 Kings 19:19); Amos was taking care of his sheep and sycamore-fig trees (Amos 7:14) and Matthew was tending his tax collecting business (Matthew 9:9). They also received “no polite, reasoned invitation” but instead were issued an “unconditional, unexplained demand” (Turner, page 135).

Although we must count the cost, we cannot know all the details or answer all the questions about what following Jesus will demand. And we know we’ll never “feel ready” or that the time is right. There are too many details, attachments and complexities in our lives to wait for the “right time.” The cost we are to count is the quality of our faith and strength of our commitment to follow Jesus. Will that last through the fiery battles and times of intense disappointment and loneliness? But to have all the details answered, all the pledges in order, everyone else satisfied with our decision—these are things that cannot wait but must rather be severed from our hearts as distractions and obstacles to ready obedience.

Not only is our response to be immediate, but also it must be...

Permanent

Jesus' calling had no time limit. When Jesus calls us to follow he doesn't negotiate for our retirement date and pension account. For these four, following Jesus involved a lifetime of obedience, service, suffering, exile and martyrdom. They followed Jesus to the end and since the end of their mortal pilgrimage have been enjoying the presence of Jesus and the fullness of the joy of paradise.

How sadly mistaken are those who say they have put in their allotment of time in serving the Lord and now it's time for someone else to take over their service or ministry. Since when does anyone of us ever follow or serve with Jesus enough? I'm reminded of what Jesus said about the absurdity of pampering a servant, just "because he did what he was told to do." Jesus said, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (Luke 17:7-10). And as long as we have breath in these mortal bodies, we are still on active duty, following Jesus, always learning and doing.

One of our ladies gave my wife, Nancy, back issues of Good Housekeeping magazine, and I read with interest an interview of Judi Dench, successful and highly acclaimed actress. Some of you sophisticates might recognize her as a Shakespearean actress, and others of us as James Bond's boss. Dame Dench, in her 70's, and suffering from macular degeneration, is nevertheless in great demand for theatre and cinema roles. Asked by the interviewer if she was considering retiring, she replied, "No, no, no! I wouldn't. If you're in the minority of people who really want to do the work they're doing and you're lucky enough to be given a chance to do it then why stop? The whole discipline of learning is terribly good for us," she continued. "...I'm learning every single day." Citing her opportunities to work under new directors, she said, It's a learning curve all of the time. I think that's very, very good for you and very important; it's like everlasting school in a way" (Dench, 27).

You and I are privileged to follow Jesus and learn from him and use our gifts with him in the everlasting school of the Kingdom. We too should say "No, no, no!" to the thought of retiring from the school of following Jesus.

Conclusion:

Jesus is calling each one of us to a higher level of following him:

To those of you who have never followed him, he is first of all calling you to a personal relationship with him. He wants to live with you and you with him in a life-changing personal relationship (as in John 1:35-39). He calls you now, without further delay, to follow him. You've had ample time to learn about him and to hear his words, perhaps more than the year these disciples had to think about Jesus. Now is the time to follow him. You can follow the example of these two young ladies who through their baptismal testimonies are declaring their commitment to follow Jesus.

To those of us who have known him, he's saying to us that it's time we got serious about following him in a life of disciplined discipleship, of spiritual growth and service in his kingdom. It's time we join together in a new resolution to really walk with God and follow Jesus in a life of obedience, worship and a growing love relationship.

It's important for you and me to realize that we are here in Belgium by divine appointment and this is the place from and to which Jesus calls us to follow him. As much as I want you to enjoy family time and travel, I also remind you that you are not on leave from following Jesus, in both your personal walk of faith and in your fellowship and service within the Body of Christ. Jesus is calling us to follow him and join in his fishing-for-people business at IBC. It's time to give priority to following Jesus and serving his church as we seek to "fish for people" in this mission field.

We are more than a missionary church. A missionary or missions-minded church often thinks its task is accomplished by giving financial and prayer support to missionaries. Instead, our vision and mission are to live out the Great Commandment (Mark 12: 28-34) and Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) as a missional people, who understand that each one of us has a mission to take Christ into our own world. As we begin our summer holiday season, let's remember that we're always pilgrims and disciples, not tourists.

And perhaps to some, it's a time to consider his call to follow him in a life of service in his kingdom, maybe even a ministry of servant leadership as a vocational missionary or minister within and through the church.

And it may be a time for all of us to renew that sense of commitment to Jesus and, whatever our station in life or vocational position, to decide to walk with God as we follow Jesus. It will never be convenient to follow Jesus. The time to obey is now.

Perhaps you can today hear Jesus say, "Come on! After me!" What will *you* do?

Comments and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. In your understanding, what does it mean to follow Jesus?
2. For you to follow Jesus, what adjustments might you be expected to make in your priorities and lifestyle?
3. What is your definition of a disciple? How can you live as a disciple in your present circumstances?
4. In what ways do you think you can be a "fisher of people"?
5. What are some ways you can improve and develop your "fishing" techniques/practices?

6. Do you think that discipleship and reaching others for Christ requires involvement with other believers? If so, what are some ways you are currently involved and ways you could be more involved with others in outreach?
7. Prayerfully reflect on your relationship with Christ and consider ways you can grow in your walk with him and your ministry with him as his disciple.

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