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1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

## FOLLOW AND FISH

It has been a month and a day since we had our great celebration of the incarnation, God coming to humanity in such a full way, that God became human in order to do so. God came and met us where we were, as we were. God didn't say, you change, and then I will come. We begin to see how this incarnate God operates engaging humanity. Jesus, as God in the flesh, goes to where people are. After he had been baptized, Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the wilderness where he faced temptations, that had he given into them, would have made him less than what God intended him to be. When he comes out of the wilderness, he hears bad news – that John the Baptist had been arrested. Perhaps he faced another temptation at that point, frightened that were he to carry through with what God was leading him to do, that it would not end well with him. But even with that which could have held him back, he goes to meet ordinary people where they were. The first ones were some who made their living by fishing. He doesn't require them to wash all the fish smell off their hands before he shows up. He goes to them and meets them where they are, as they are, along the shoreline with their nets and boats.

Jesus approaches and talks to these fishermen in terms they would understand. He says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." From the start, he tells them that he cares enough about them to not leave them where they have been. Their lives to that point hadn't been all bad. They were making a living. They were feeding themselves and their families. But Jesus wanted them to know, wanted them to experience that there is more to life than just physically keeping oneself alive. Right up front, he tells them that if they would follow him, he would change them. In English, it almost sounds like he would force them to do something they didn't want to do – "I will make you fish for people." Yet they willingly and quickly leave behind the familiar to explore something altogether different.

Matthew tells us that two left their nets behind, two others left their boat behind. They would not continue to fish for fish for a while. Instead of just a job that would feed them day by day, here was an opportunity to explore a relationship that would nourish them for a lifetime. They left behind business as usual. Something about that person named Jesus called them to strike out in a new direction that would lead them to encounter the very realm of God. They left behind a lower priority catch for a higher one, when Jesus told them that they would eventually be fishing for people instead of perch. When they got to the point of sharing in Jesus' ministry, they simply shared and showed how their experience with God through Jesus had changed them. It meant they now cared about what other people needed. It meant they were in touch with a deeper purpose for their lives. It meant they walked in the light that came from Jesus.

In order for us to be disciples or followers of Christ does not mean that we all must leave our occupations in order to do so, although some of us might do so. The word 'vocation' comes from the Greek word for calling. If we have a calling to do a particular job, then we have a calling higher still, a vocation to follow Jesus. In Jesus' call to Simon and Andrew, he calls them not to abandon all that they know, but rather to put what they know at the service of the gospel. Jesus says "I will make you fish for people." Something in their new calling would be an extension of their old calling. Jesus plans to use all of the skills these fishermen have learned on the sea: patience, discernment, observation, and respect for God's creation, and he will put these skills to work transforming the world. That is what God does - finding the most ordinary people and then using the hard-earned skills we have to transform the world. For some, these skills are earned in years of education and hard work. For others, these skills may even come about through experiences of difficult suffering and hardship. We are shaped by such things, and God is able to use any of our life experiences in ways that could enrich the lives of others.

In order to follow Jesus, the fishermen had to leave certain things behind. The second wave of followers of Jesus also would need to leave certain things behind. Some years later, in his first letter to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul would chide that congregation for splitting into identity groups based on the leader with whom they most closely identified. Some there said they belonged to Apollos or

Paul or Cephas, which was a Greek version of the name, Peter. I don't know if these were theological rifts or a division in worship preferences or some other stylistic split. Some congregations today are so focused on the strong personality of a leader that being a part of the church of Jesus Christ seems secondary to their identity. However, the messenger mustn't be confused with the gospel message. I'm thankful there are Christians with a wide variety of styles, as long as the focus is on the One who humbly and lovingly revealed God's reign among us. There is much to love about the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), but our core identity as those who follow Jesus must not be denominational. I am enriched by our congregation's styles of worship, in our two services, but those mustn't be the source of our primary understanding of who we are. We are called to be followers of Jesus Christ. He is the One who provides direction and purpose, giving us opportunity to share good news.

He leads his followers still, never misleading in doing so. He can unify us, but he doesn't ever use the bait of hate to do so, as some seek to do. He never picks up the tools of fear and intimidation in leading those who will follow. He does not confuse unity with uniformity. Such an understanding of our Lord's leadership is required if we are to each find acceptance and affirmation within the church. After all, God calls each of us to specific tasks in this ongoing experimental community of faith. In following Christ, we don't all do the same things and we don't all do them in the same ways. Some of us serve as ruling elders or deacons. Some of us are focused on food ministry or in caring for those who are bereaved or frail. Some of us are dreamers or organizers. Some of us are gifted in reaching out to others and building a welcoming spirit in our faith community. Others are worship leaders or teachers or tidy-ers or building specialists. Thankfully, there is a wide range of things to do to be active in Christ's ministry in this place. We don't always agree on matters of theology or practice. But we can agree that we belong first to Christ and then we do belong to one another as sisters and brothers in Christ, as we seek to follow him together. Our Lord loved, even died for those with whom he disagreed. We belong to him; we belong to one another.

This One who became human to engage us, still comes to ordinary people like you and me. He loves us enough not to leave us where we have been. As we try to

follow him, extraordinary things begin to happen within us, around us, and even through us. In following, we still have to leave certain things behind. But if we were to ask Andrew, Peter, James, and John whether it was all worth it, I'm confident I know what their answer would have been. "I have decided to follow Jesus; I have decided to follow Jesus"; let's walk together to follow Jesus; "no turning back, no turning back."

<sup>1</sup> There is confusion about the origins of the hymn, "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus." Some attribute it to Sadhu Sundar Singh, a missionary serving in India. Some attribute it to an unknown Christian convert in India.