

Being a Disciple

Luke 5:1-11

Growing Up in Christ

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

I've been asked why I've gotten out of the pulpit and come down here to the chancel, and there are two reasons for this. First, in the preaching of discipleship sermons, I believe that proximity is very important to the message. Discipleship is not about distance or being away from the crowd; it is about being close and personal, connected to people. The second reason is a little more practical, and that is, once in awhile, I like to have a little more space to walk around. It feels a little bit like Jesus on the beach. So if you could just pretend that this is a beach for a while. Then I'll probably need to find a boat to sit in, too. Let us offer a prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ, we are in your presence, in the power of your word, and the power is on. We are grateful for the goodness of the fact that you have come to us as the incarnate Word, and that you now speak to us from your written Word by the power of your Spirit in Word. And so we receive what you have to say to move us toward following you in all aspects of life. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.

Tomorrow we celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday. Dr. King is known for his commitment to nonviolent resistance. That is the message he wanted to proclaim. In one of his more dramatic statements, he said, "True nonviolent resistance is not unrealistic submission to evil power. It is rather a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love. In the faith that it is better to be the recipient of violence than the inflicter of it, since the latter only multiplies the existence of violence and bitterness in the universe, while the former may develop a sense of shame in the opponent and thereby bring about a transformation and change of heart."

Gil Bailey, who is a cultural anthropologist, reflects on the issues of violence and nonviolence, and at the core of his sense of how people are transformed from a world of violence to a commitment to nonviolence. He talks about mimetic desire. It is the passion of human beings to imitate someone, to be influenced by others, to be influenced by the patterns of life from a culture, from a philosophy, from a person, from a community, that every one of us will be transformed or formed by somebody or something. Bob Dylan simply put it this way in one of his great pieces of music: "You gotta serve somebody." You gotta follow somebody.

Mimetic desire is what Jesus is appealing to when he invites the disciples to follow him. He is saying, you have followed other authorities, your parents and rabbis. I want you to come and follow me. Be my disciples. In this text, we see it clearly that Jesus comes to the disciples personally as he teaches the crowd. There's always a connection in Jesus' pattern of life between his teaching of the large community of people and his invitation to particular people to come and follow him. Jesus never invites the whole crowd to follow him. They will anyway, for various reasons, but Jesus is interested in a personal connection to the people he calls disciples.

Jesus goes out and looks for them. He goes to where they work and live. He meets them on their turf. In this particular case, he meets these potential disciples on the beach and in their boats. He sees Simon in his boat. Jesus gets into the boat and says to Simon, "If you could just push out a little ways, out into the water, I'm going to be able to be in a better place to speak to this crowd." On a calm sea, without wind, a particular reflection of the water against the crowd would amplify his voice and be able to communicate clear language to the multitudes. Jesus is committed to addressing crowds, but he is more committed to addressing individual people like you and me and inviting individuals into discipleship.

Not too many weeks ago, Time magazine declared you the person of the year. A rather dramatic

statement, and you say, well, how could this be, that literally billions of people could be the person of the year? It is a recognition of the power of the individual and the influence of society because of networks, because of the web. Jesus is like that. He addresses individuals personally. You. And he does it in your context, in your boat, in your vocation, in your place of family, in the place where you live, where you exist. Jesus is addressing you today, with this word, and inviting you to come out of the crowd and be a part of a closer relationship with him, as a disciple.

Jesus comes to you in your place of work. He comes to you in the office, in the church. He comes to you in family, he comes to you whether you're in the military or the government. He comes to you in the law office or the business office. He comes to you where you do your work every day. And he comes to address you on that turf because he wants to catch your attention, to call you away from being preoccupied and owned by your circumstances, to being committed to who he is and what he is about in the world.

The focus is on the Word of God. There is always in Jesus an invitation to engage the word. In our Reformed tradition, we invite you every Sunday sermon to engage the Word. But Jesus goes one step further. He doesn't just engage the Word in the crowd; he engages the Word in the disciples with his own presence and with his own conversation with them. Jesus wants to have a conversation with you about the Word, about the truth, and that conversation is most likely to happen when a small group of people are gathered in a little place like a boat, where you can, together, without the interference of the crowd, understand each other, listen to each other, and be free to ask questions about who Jesus is.

It is this Word of God that moves you when you hear it. What you see in the action of that word will catch your attention and move you to discipleship. When Peter is out there in the boat with Jesus, and Jesus says, "Now that I've finished, I want you to push out a little farther, Peter Simon, into the deeper water," that movement is an action of Jesus calling Simon to a deeper action of life together. It is not just about the fishing. It is about going deep with Jesus and taking the risk to do so. For, you see, Simon had already fished all night. He'd already put everything he had into it as a professional fisherman with his partners. They had exhausted themselves, and now they had decided there was no point in continuing, so they were washing their boats and cleaning their nets. But Jesus said, "Put out into deep water and you'll catch more fish."

Simon, recognizing that Jesus is a rabbi and should be respected, does what Jesus asks him to do, probably thinking all the time, "Oh, this will never happen. It's not likely that he really knows anything about fishing. It's unlikely that he's going to be able to produce any more than we produce, and we'll prove to him that it was a useless pursuit all night." And much to his discovery and chagrin, they catch a huge amount of fish. Not just enough for one boat, but for two boats. They catch so much, they almost sink.

That is one of the ways God catches our attention. One of the ways that Jesus invites you into discipleship, when you take Jesus into a deep place with you and you challenge Jesus, "Can you make this happen when I cannot make it happen on my own?" Then Jesus will show you an abundant sense of grace and presence. It doesn't mean that every time you go out you're going to catch more than you need. It doesn't mean that every time you have a need, Jesus is just going to immediately, magically make it happen. But it means that there will be great moments where you, beyond a shadow of a doubt, recognize that the grace of Jesus Christ is the power of God and able to produce when you cannot produce.

My father was an entrepreneur and a businessman who worked for Lockheed for many years. He decided to venture out on his own because he'd gotten tired of working in a corporation. So he started his own business, and it struggled, like many young businesses do. He worked very hard. Many times he worked not only all day, but he worked often through the night. He worked enough to try to raise his family of six children and five or six cats. Sometimes it seemed like the cats ate more than the kids did. And he was concerned that he might not be able to make a go of that business, so he worked overtime. One night when he had been working very hard at a job that had not gone well, and he was literally working all through the night in exhaustion, he delivered what he had produced to the person who needed it, but his customer said, "John, this is all wrong. I can't accept it." My dad realized that he had failed in a huge job worth lots of money and had to go back and do it all over again.

It was at that point he turned to Jesus and said, "Lord, I can't make this business happen." It was at that

point—and he clearly communicated to us children what he had heard—the Lord had spoken to him and said, “If you will pay more attention to me and my presence, then I’ll take care of your business.” From that moment on, my father understood the abundance was in the hand of Jesus Christ and not in his ability to make the production work. If he did his work and he paid more attention to the Lord and the presence of Jesus, and he paid more attention to the people who were hungry to know Jesus, then he would have his work go well.

While we had our ups and downs in life, eventually that business was prosperous and successful and he was able to care for his family. I would maintain that that’s similar to what the disciples heard at this point: Jesus saying to them, “If you can pay attention to me and my presence, I will come into your presence and I will make what you need happen, but you are now called to participate in the life that I am giving to you.” And Peter Simon, recognizing that Jesus had provided a huge intervention with fish, was overwhelmed by the grace of the presence of the Lord, and changed his address from Rabbi and Master to “Lord, I shouldn’t be in your presence. Get away for me, for I am a sinful person.”

When we realize that Jesus Christ is more powerful than we are, more able to keep things going and make this happen than we can, then we recognize our limitations, and we are willing to allow Jesus to be Lord. We become disciples. It is in that pattern of life that the disciples move from being in shallow water to being in deep water, from being a part of the crowd to becoming a part of a small group of people who walk with Jesus. They move from the beach to the water; they move in life from the trivial issues of productivity to the deep issues of spirituality and relationships. Then, Jesus says, “From now on, I’m going to teach you how to catch people,” for people are the focus of the kingdom of God.

As much as my dad loved to produce really good parts, he was more committed as the years went on to being with people. He would often, when we were in the middle of a production run, take time off to meet with an individual person. He would listen to their story, and he would pray with them. And I would often say to my dad, “Dad, there’s a lot of work to do. You don’t have time to be with these people.” And he would correct me and say, “No, I don’t have the freedom not to be with them, because the business belongs to God.”

I think that, in fact, is the message that discipleship gives to us today. That all our family life, our business life, our government life, our pattern of law, our pattern of everyday activity and productivity is about what God wants to do with us. It’s all on the focus of human beings and the saving of people. That means we take time for people. It’s not an excuse not to do our work or not do it well. It means that in the midst of all that, we as people who listen to the voice of Jesus say people are important and we’re going to spend our time catching people.

Jesus engages the disciples to catch people, and his initial catch was not only the fish but the other disciples around Simon, the other people in the boats who could come over and catch the abundance of what was happening in the nets. Jesus invited them, as well. And so Jesus eventually takes what they’ve experienced at this moment, this dramatic moment of recognition of who he is, and calls them to follow him and they leave everything behind. They leave their boats behind, their father and mother behind, they leave their commitment to the business behind, and they follow him. That is being a disciple. Nothing else is more important than following Jesus.

We discover that when Jesus gives us the business back, the family back, the relationships back, the practice of law back, the work of government back, we are no longer by ourselves. Jesus is in our midst. Today you are following something in your life. You are following a culture, or a group, or a philosophy, or a religion, or a form of Christianity, or a church in some form. The real question is are you going to follow Jesus the Christ as described in scripture. And if you are willing to do that, everything else become less important. Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, may you help us to get these priorities of life right, to realize that your presence is more powerful than all we can possibly do on our own. Help us to work with you on your agenda rather than demand that you work on our agenda. And we ask that you would now help us live as a follower of you, following you into the future in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

