

Faith to Follow

Matthew 4:18-22

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This morning I am concluding a three-week series on the call of faith. As our text today illustrates, we do not find faith in order to follow Jesus. We follow Jesus in order to find faith.

When we first met the disciples in the Gospel according to Matthew, it is clear that they had already carved out pretty good lives for themselves. Peter and his brother Andrew were casting nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. James and his brother John were sitting in a boat with their father Zebedee mending nets because they too were fishermen. In fact, fishing was their family business. The smell of the fish was permanently on their hands, and the smell of the sea was a part of every breath they had taken. This was the life they knew, and they lived it day after day, year after year. But on one particular, ordinary day Jesus of Nazareth walked by and said, ³Follow me.² We are told,³They immediately left their nets and followed him.²

When you read this for the first time, you have to ask, "What? Where are they going? How will they pay their bills? What about their jobs? Their families? What's the plan?" It is clear that they don't know the answers to any of these responsible questions. Their only plan is to follow Jesus.

How does Jesus get these men to drop their lives to follow him? It is not by convicting them of their sins. These men are not penitent sinners. That comes later. Neither are they seekers who have made a theological discovery about Jesus. That comes much later. At this point they know little about Jesus. We can't even say they have faith yet, and we certainly can't say that they understand where this journey will take them. But there is just something about Jesus that is so compelling, these men immediately drop everything to follow him. It is if this were the call for which they had been waiting their whole lives.

The decision to start following Jesus is not rational or irrational. It is a-rational. Rationality has little to do with it. In this regard, it is exactly like the other important decisions of life. The most important commitments you have made in life have come about not because you made a list of pros and cons, but because something inside you jumped up to say, "I have to do this!"

When a couple comes to see me for premarital counseling, I am always struck by the difficulty they have describing why they want to get married. With perfect rationality they can explain why they have chosen the jobs they've chosen. They can tell me why they are Democrats or Republicans, why they like Fords better than Chevys, and even why they prefer Wheat Chex to Cheerios. But when it comes to explaining why they are about to get married, making the greatest commitment of their lives, they get all gushy and sentimental. Finally, they say something like, "I just know I have to do this." Right. Exactly right. Why do they later decide to have children? What rational process was at work then? It wasn't to save money or to sleep better at night. Why does anyone choose to raise a child? For the same reason a person gets married, and for the same reason a person rises to take a stand on an issue of justice, and for the same reason a person starts to follow Jesus. Because they are called to it.

So let us be clear. The journey of those who follow Jesus Christ begins not with a decision, but with his decision to call us. These fishermen have not weighed the pros and cons of following and decided that Jesus will help them meet their goals in life. No, Jesus has decided to call them to himself. And the call is so overwhelming, they have to follow.

This is why we baptize our children. Long before they are able to choose Jesus, the sacrament makes it clear that Jesus has chosen them. The difference is great. If the journey of faith begins with our choices, we will always be in doubt. We will worry "Do I have enough faith? Was I right to follow? Who am I to follow?" But if the journey begins with the call of Jesus, then our doubts about our faithlessness become opportunities to discover more about the faithfulness of Christ.

When I try to explain infant baptism to our new members or to the parents of our children, I usually remind them of the time it first occurred to them that they were in love. Some night, after a series of wonderful dates, one of you decided to say, "I love you" to the other person. Maybe you planned on saying it, or maybe it just came up. Maybe it was at a lovely restaurant. But you took the risk. "I love you." Then you stopped breathing and waited for the response. And only one response would do. If the other person said, "Thank you," well, forget it. Just say, "Check please" and go home. You can't wait for a while to hear the "I love you, too" but you are never going to breath easily until you do. In baptism, God takes the risk. He says, "I love you" first. Then we hold our breath for years waiting for the child eventually to say, "I love you, too."

Every time we witness a baptism in this church, we each reaffirm our own baptismal vows remembering that our journey in faith began just like these babies and just like these fishermen. It began because we were called to the love of God in Jesus Christ. Look again at the reaffirmation of baptismal vows printed in the bulletin that you made earlier in the worship service. It begins by stating, Through baptism we enter the covenant God has established. Covenant is another word for relationship, and, again, we don't establish this relationship with our belief. God does. Within this covenant God gives us new life, guards us from evil, and nurtures us in love. So the covenant creates our life, and it nurtures our life in God's "I love you." In embracing that covenant, we choose whom we will serve by turning from evil and turning to Jesus Christ. Now we can talk about our faith.

Faith is a way of turning from the life we have built for ourselves. As respectable as that life may seem, it always leads to evil, because a life we have built for ourselves leads us away from God. But by faith we turn toward this Savior who says, "I love you," and we choose to receive a new life by saying, "I love you, too." So faith is a daily decision to turn away from our resolve to achieve a life and to turn toward the grace of receiving a life.

The disciples had to turn first from their comfortable lives as fishermen and turn toward the mystery of a life lived in the daily following of their Savior. Whenever they got discouraged with Jesus, what did they do? They turned back to the fishing boats. But have you ever noticed that they are never catching anything until Jesus shows up again and invites them to turn back to him.

The passage that immediately precedes our text today tells us that Jesus left his home in Nazareth and began to preach, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." Repent has become such a heavy-duty word that it is now laden with tones of judgment. I know that when you hear a preacher tell you to repent, you're terrified that you are going to hear another "Bad Dog" sermon. But before these biblical words developed religious tones, they were just ordinary words. The word in Greek is "metanoia" and all it means is to turn. If you were leaving your house and remembered you had forgotten your keys, you would repent and go back and get them. What Jesus is doing in his preaching when he calls people to repent is simply to invite them to turn to him, the only one who can lead them home to the Father.

Every time we renew our baptismal vows, we are recommitting ourselves to turn back to Jesus. Baptism, thus, is like a Presbyterian revival service. Or at least it is as close to that as we are ever going to get. But don't repeat this reaffirmation of vows lightly. What you are promising before God and the church is that you are leaving something behind to follow Jesus.

This is one of the central themes in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. You cannot turn toward God without turning away from something else that you once trusted. Abraham and Sarah had to turn away from their comfortable life in Ur of the Chaldeans. Moses had to turn away from his comfortable despair in the desert. David had to turn away from his anonymous life as a shepherd. James and John had to turn away from their father Zebedee and the family business. On the road to Damascus Paul had to turn away from his religious pride as a Pharisee. Once the initial turn to a loving God is made, then they are caught up in the daily drama of continuing to turn toward their savior who is leading them into a life they had never imagined.

The greatest danger is not that you won't get what you want in life, but that you will settle for it. It isn't that you dream too big, but that you do not dream big enough. Only Jesus can lead you into his own dreams for your life.

To get to the dreams Jesus has for your life is to be constantly on the move. This is another common theme of the Bible. People in the Scriptures are constantly in motion. And the movement isn't always geographical. Sometimes it is your relationships that are in motion. Sometimes it is your job, your health, and the world around you that is changing.

Every time you get to a new place on the journey, you are confronted with a choice. Now that things are confusing, difficult, and even overwhelming you have to make this choice which hammers out your faith. Will you turn back to the old life and the obtainable dreams? Or will you turn in faith to Jesus saying, "I don't know where we are going, and I don't know how we will get there, but I will stay on the journey because I do know that I still love you, too."

O God, give us the courage of your Holy Spirit to turn away from our sin, our despair, our resolve, that we may turn back to your grace, your hope, and your dreams for our lives. Amen.