

FOLLOW ME

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Mark 1: 14-20

Did you get it?

It's very subtle, but did you get the pun Jesus makes?

He's walking there along the road on the edge of a little fishing village, and he sees these two guys going about their business, which happened to be fishing. And he wants to strike up a conversation with them. So he starts off with a bit of humor just to show that, even though he is the Son of God and has been commissioned to announce the nearness of the reign of God, it doesn't mean it has to be all fire and brimstone, all "woe to you" and "repent." He can have fun, too. So, he makes a play on words, about fishing for people.

Now, granted, the joke might not have them rolling in the aisles in the best comedy clubs in Jerusalem, but he's not playing the comedy clubs in Jerusalem. He is playing the circuit in Galilee. When Jesus left his home in Nazareth, rather than settle in one of the more cosmopolitan cities, such as Tiberius or Sepphoris or even Jerusalem, instead of one of these centers of cultural, political, social, and economic power, he moves out into the frontier, and he chooses the small fishing village of Capernaum. As William Carter describes this scene, "Jesus locates himself among the marginal, with the poor not the wealthy, with the rural peasants not the urban elite, with the ruled not the rulers, with the powerless and exploited not the powerful, with those who resist imperial demands not enforce them. He [demonstrates] the gospel's preference for the apparently small and insignificant places and people who, nevertheless, are central for God's purposes."

So he makes a joke that Simon and Andrew, James and John, fishermen in Capernaum, would get. It's something that maybe *only* they would get, because it is a kind of inside joke, a kind of vernacular that only a fisherman would understand.

And as Anna Carter Florence points out, it is also a brilliant approach to calling disciples. She says, "Jesus' call to each of us begins not with what he knows, but with what we know. It begins not with what he does best, but with what we do best. On our turf and in our language, insider jokes and all. Follow me, you fishing-people, and I will make you fish-for-people! Amazing, isn't it? Before we hear a word about what's involved in this following, he reassures us that we can do it, because it is not so different from what we have already done. In fact, we already have several of the job skills involved. We just have to adapt what we know." She even suggests that this pun can be adapted to wherever we find ourselves now:

Follow me, you farmers, and I will make you plant seeds of the gospel!

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 the community of faith!

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

Follow me, you seamstresses and tailors,

and I will make you mend our torn 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 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!

This is how Jesus calls us. He begins with whoever we are; he meets us wherever we are. And that is the way he shows us to reach out to others, to make disciples. The process is not so much “come to where we are, join us, learn our inside jokes, master our jargon and try to imitate our ways—do all that first and then you’ll be a disciple just like us.”

The way Jesus shows us is to go out to where ordinary people are, listen to the way they speak, learn who they are, be with them in their way of life. And it doesn’t hurt to have a good sense of humor along the way.

But there is also another side to this story in Matthew’s gospel. Jesus meets those four fishermen where they are, but he doesn’t just leave them there. The call isn’t just to admire Jesus, agree with him, and maybe even laugh at his jokes—the call is to follow. And for these first four disciples, it is a call that takes them away from where they are and what they know; it takes them out of the familiar and into some unknown adventure in discipleship.

And this may be more troublesome for us. We probably identify more with Zebedee, the father of James and John. Like him we may like that part where Jesus comes to us and speaks our lingo, we may even laugh at the bad joke, but we prefer to stay in the boat with what we know. It may not be much of a life, but at least we know where we are going, or rather, *not* going. At least we are comfortable.

But the call of Christ, even though it begins with who we are and with what we know, takes us out of the boat of familiarity and leads us into a fuller and more abundant life. As Mark Ralls puts it, “When Christ calls, he beckons us beyond the point of familiarity, asking us to risk doing something we don’t know how to do, to become someone we’re not yet sure we know how to be. It’s not just that we are taking a risk on Christ. Each and every time he calls, he is taking a risk on us.”

Mark says that when Jesus called these first followers, he had already set out to preach the good news of the coming of God’s reign. He had already set out to meet everyone where they were, to address their sicknesses, to heal whatever wounds the world has inflicted upon them. In all the gospels, the announcement that God’s reign has begun is followed by signs of healing and wholeness, signs of reconciliation and being restored to community. The message of Jesus is that good news comes in a concrete form that has to do with the real world of health care and poverty and humane living conditions. Throughout the gospel, proclaiming the good news is so closely tied to curing and healing, to addressing physical and material needs, that they are hardly distinguishable. It seems that teaching, preaching, and healing are inextricably linked together with a proclamation—in fact, they seem to be the very signs that the reign of God is at hand.

The place God calls us to is not just some spiritual realm that we enter at the end of our lives or that arrives at the end of time. The realm of God has come near, it is imminent in time and space, here and now. And it calls for a response. It calls for us to follow Christ by taking up for ourselves the ministry of bringing healing and wholeness.

Not all of us are called to be a Dr. Paul Farmer and to head out for Haiti or Rwanda and open free clinics. Fortunately for the world, God already has a Paul Farmer to do that. God does not call us to be Dorothy Day or Mother Teresa. God does not even call all of us to be Deacons or Elders. But

God does call each one of us. And the God who calls you wants you for who you are, who God created you to be. But, like those first disciples, God does not leave us the way we are. God takes whoever we are, and transforms us; God begins wherever we have been placed, with whatever we have, and makes something of it, makes something of us, gives us a vital role in the coming of God's kingdom.

I know that each week I see signs of the gospel being lived out in the life of this congregation and our individual lives. But still, Jesus calls us again and again, and says "The kingdom is at hand. Turn and follow me." The challenge is to discern and discover where it is we are being called to venture out this time, what risks we are being called to undertake.

The kingdom of God has come near, so near we can reach out and touch it, so near we can allow it to reach out and touch us. Will we remain safe and sound in our little boat here, quietly going about our business, mending our nets? Or, will we take whatever we have been given, whoever we are, and follow Christ along the way of discipleship?

Will we launch out into the risky sea?

Which do you think Jesus is calling us to do?

May the words of the hymn "Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore" be our response.

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