

ANSWER THE CALL?

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And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Mark 1:17-18)

Every evening when it's time to shut down email, my routine includes checking the junk folder for any legitimate messages that may have been caught there. Once in a while I'll find something important, but the vast majority of emails in the spam filter are poorly worded, grammatically incorrect, transparently ridiculous scams. With a superior laugh I delete them all and think, "How could anyone possibly fall for one of these things?" Well, one day last summer I discovered that I was not as fool-proof as I fancied myself to be.

We had been blessed with the opportunity to spend a few days on the beach at Fire Island – a welcome reprieve from the city. For me it would be a working break with plenty of Zoom meetings to host and emails to send. I would need to bring along a laptop and, of course, my phone. The laptop is something I don't often use because, with my office in the rectory, my desktop computer is always within reach. Also my phone at the time was brand new, so I was still getting familiar with all its bells and whistles. The point is, for the next few days I would be out of my element; every screen before me would be new and different from what I normally saw.

Shortly after we arrived I checked my email and noticed that I had a voice message on my office phone. Wanting to answer readily the call I tapped to retrieve it, only to be alerted that I would need to enter my password. Thinking this had something to do with my phone's being new, I typed in the four-digit code. It didn't work. Perhaps it was my computer password that I needed to enter. No? How about my username to log in? Why could I not access my own account at the church? Suddenly, the terrible truth hit me like a punch in the gut. The message that looked entirely legitimate was in fact a "Phishing" scam. Someone or some bot out there in cyberspace had gone phishing for my passwords, and I had taken the bait – hook, line, and sinker. Fortunately, I was able to change all my passwords immediately, and our IT person verified that everything was clean and secure. He also gave me a bit of a scolding to be much more on guard against those who phish for people. I responded contritely, with no superior laugh this time.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Mark we've heard how Jesus went fishing for people. The first two who answered his call were Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. Shortly thereafter the brothers James and John, the sons of Zebedee immediately became followers of Jesus. What would it mean? We assume that the call of Jesus would be an all-consuming thing. The four of them were successful fishermen, but they would leave their nets and boats, never to return to them as long as they were in the company of Jesus. It would be the same for all the disciples who took the bait when Jesus called. Whether they were fishermen, tax collectors, farmers, carpenters, lawyers, or toolmakers, Jesus presented them with an urgent, higher calling. No longer would they have time for their less important occupations. Jesus would lead them to the places and people where real ministry needed to happen. For the next three years, seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day, the twelve disciples would be walking in the company of Jesus: following him, taking in his teachings, witnessing his miracles, and never leaving his presence.

What else would it mean for those who answered the call? Well, they left their families just as quickly and decisively as they left their trades. James and John left their father Zebedee in the boat – not a word of good-bye, not a feeling of remorse. I've always felt sorry for poor

Zebedee. We can imagine that James and John had probably tagged at his heels since they were toddlers. Once they were old enough to work, Zebedee was probably proud to pass on to them what he knew of life and living. But loyalty to Jesus would leave no more room for particular friendships and family relationships. They would be distractions. *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father, and mother, and wife and children ... and, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).*

We wonder: why would they drop everything and everyone to answer the call? It must have been that Jesus was so obviously the messiah – so hypnotic in his appeal – that people fell into a spell in his presence and followed him without any hesitation. *Immediately they left the boat and their father, and they followed him.* Real disciples don’t ask questions, they don’t doubt, they just follow. Here is where all the bells and whistles of our personal alarm systems should begin sounding. This isn’t right. Don’t take the bait. Back away before the terrible truth hits you like a punch in the gut. You will regret it. We can hear the regret already in some of the Capitol rioters who have been apprehended and charged with serious crimes. Many now bemoan that they were led astray. Even the guy with fur and horns is expressing remorse, especially after having not received a last-minute presidential pardon. Somehow “the QAnon Shaman,” as he’s called, is not a sympathetic figure, and he’s likely to pay dearly for his transgressions. So beware of anyone who comes fishing for you. Answering the call may be at the expense of your family and your livelihood.

Obviously, I am exaggerating what we think it means to answer the call of Jesus, but not by much. In storefront windows of businesses that are closing we’ve all seen signs proclaiming, “Everything must go.” Unfortunately, we often talk about the life of discipleship in the same way: “Everything must go” if you answer the call of Jesus. But you can’t leave your job. Who will support you if you do? You can’t leave your family because you love them and feel a sacred responsibility to take care of them. Did you catch the line in today’s short little reading from First Corinthians (7:29-31), in which Paul counsels abstinence even within marriage? That’s going to be a hard no. If answering the call of Jesus means everything must go, at the very least we have a PR problem when it comes to our newcomer ministry.

I believe that we can draw different and better conclusions about what life in Christ meant for those original disciples, and what it might mean for us today. Indeed, we might even speak as if the Christian faith were good news, not bad news for a world that is hungry for meaning and purpose. The first thing to say is that Jesus wasn’t some hypnotic stranger who appeared out of nowhere and beckoned people to follow him. He wasn’t a cult leader who preyed on vulnerable people in their time of weakness. Rather, the Gospels give us evidence to consider that James and John knew Jesus well. Their mother was a woman named Salome. When we compare the varying Gospel lists of the women who were witness to the crucifixion of Jesus, it becomes clear that Salome was the sister of Mary, Jesus’ mother. If indeed Salome and Mary were sisters, then Zebedee was an uncle of Jesus, and James and John were his first cousins. Imagine: Jesus came to them not as a mysterious messenger from out of the cloud. He came to them as someone they knew.

Furthermore, although James and John left Zebedee in the moment, we see the disciples, and even Jesus himself, continuing in their family relations. Simon Peter had a wife throughout the three years of Jesus’ public ministry. I may be wrong here, but I imagine Peter would have given that hard no to Paul’s counsel of marital abstinence. The Gospels continue to list Peter and Andrew as brothers, as they do James and John. So the brotherly relations, with all the sibling rivalry, loyalty, and affection continued. James and John continued to have contact with their mother, Salome, who once asked Jesus if her two sons might sit on each side of him when he came into his glory. Such an outlandish request only begins to make sense if, in fact, Salome was Jesus’ aunt. Jesus also spent much time with his mother, Mary, and with his brothers and sisters. Yes,

Jesus had brothers and sisters, and while those relations were indeed strained at times, still they continued. All of their family relations continued, even though, at that moment, *they left their nets and followed Jesus*.

Finally, I believe it is unrealistic to think that the disciples never had a minute, or a day, or a week, or even a month to themselves during the three years they followed Jesus. Not only did Peter have a marriage that would require attention, he also had a house and a boat – a boat, by the way, that Jesus often pressed into sacred service. Could it be that Jesus, during the three years of his ministry, would periodically call the disciples together for specific micro-missions or intense periods of teaching and retreat, after which they would return to their homes, families, and occupations? I think it's a possibility that might account for all the varying "call" stories in the Gospels. It's a possibility that suggests Jesus called people to be his followers in the midst of their lives, not from out of their lives. The lives they were living, the families they were loving, and the trades they were practicing all mattered to Jesus. Everything from the way they conducted business, to the way they mended their nets, to the domestic life of relating to family and dealing with rude neighbors mattered. These were among the places where Jesus would have his followers – then and now – introduce and practice the ethics of the kingdom of God he spent so much time teaching them. The simple places. The everyday places.

Still, you will hear in some pulpits or read in various books that if you answer the call of Jesus, everything must go. You will have to give away all your money to the poor, or deliver your body to be burned, or never think a stray thought, or witness publicly to uninterested strangers, or pray without ceasing, or at least walk around feeling guilty about most things – if you're really a disciple. Granted, some people should walk around feeling guilty about the way they are living their lives, and Christ does call some people to take on perilous ministries. Witness Jonah (3:1-5, 10) in today's Old Testament reading, whom God called to preach repentance in the great city of Nineveh. But for most of us the calling to be a disciple of Jesus happens right where we are, within the relationships we have, doing the work we are doing. No matter how mundane or common our lives may be, this is where the real ministry of Christ needs to happen. In her epic poem, *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning would write:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries

We can take her to mean that sacred service and meaning are to be found in the common stuff and ordinary routines of the lives that you are I are living. The choice is ours between approaching it all with great reverence and respect, or just sitting around and living on the surface.

In the Collect of the Day we will pray for the grace *to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ*. My hope today is that we might have cleared away some of our misunderstandings or reservations or fears about what it really entails to pray today's prayer and mean it. My hope is that we've addressed some of our hesitations that are preventing a closer walk with Jesus. Answering the call is not about taking the bait of some thief who comes to steal and destroy. No, it is to accept the invitation of the one who comes that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Answering the call is to dare see that every common bush is afire with God. It is to be a follower of Jesus in the simple places, the everyday places, among the most difficult crowd of all: the people you know, the people who see you every day, the people right under your nose, all the time.

"Follow me," said Jesus to Peter and Andrew, and to James and John. "Follow me," says Jesus to you and me. Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call.