

Pastor Mollie's Sermon
January 26, 2020
Matthew 4:18-23

In the research leading up to a grant on Christian vocation funded by the Lilly Endowment, a team of folks discovered two perplexing things.

1) Graduates of the five institutions involved (Catholic Theological Union, Duke Divinity School, Fuller Seminary, Princeton Seminary, and Luther Seminary) all reported that "vocation" was a significant category in their teaching and preaching.

Not all that perplexing

2) At the same time, however, it turned out that most members of the congregations they serve *don't* feel called.

Most of the folks listening to their pastors preaching and teaching on vocation, don't see most of what they do outside of the church as worthy of God's attention and interest. How can that be?

One possibility is that in our teaching on vocation we have overly emphasized work as a primary place of vocation.

all too often we equated "vocation" with "occupation."

In fact, in a survey conducted by one of the members of this research team, discovered that clergy tend to greatly overestimate the amount of satisfaction, meaning, and purpose that their people derive from their work.

Why?

Probably because as religious professionals we actually *do* derive significant satisfaction, purpose, and meaning from our work.

For some folks, however, work is, well, *work*, with moments of meaning and purpose but often devoid of significant connection to whom they really believe themselves to be and to the rest of their lives.

Where do people find the greatest sense of fulfillment, meaning, and purpose?

Relationships. Even those who identified their work as a source of meaning and fulfillment usually cited their relationships *at* work as the places of particular significance.

All of which highlights one particular phrase in today's Gospel reading:

"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of *people*."

As Professor David Lose puts it... we are Not "heralds of God" or "disciples of the Messiah" or "witnesses of the divine" or even "the first Christians,"

but rather *fishers of people*.

All of those other things may have been implied or may eventually come to be, "but what strikes me is that Jesus is calling these first disciples not into work but into relationship.

And perhaps that's one of the great challenges...

we have too often stressed the *arenas* in which we exercise our vocation -- historically, we talk about government, family, and church -- or emphasized the *roles* we play as employees, employers, parents, citizens, volunteers, and the like,

rather than emphasize the concrete relationships in which we are involved and the actual persons with whom we are in relationship.

Don't get me wrong -- concern about arenas and roles is valuable.

But in our contemporary context it may be that we have forgotten, or at least underplayed, the highly relational nature of vocation as articulated by Martin Luther and other reformers.

All those roles we play and all those stations appointed by God, after all, are furnished in order to care for our *neighbors*, both those people who happen to be all around us and especially those who are in need. Part of the challenge of a passage like this is that it is so difficult for most of us to imagine getting up and leaving everyone and everything we know to follow Jesus. And so we figure the disciples were extraordinary, first-century super heroes of the faith that we can admire but not identify with. One way to deal with that, I suppose, is to follow some contemporary biblical scholars who insist that Jesus had actually been living in Capernaum for a while and had known Peter, Andrew, James, and John for some time, and so this call was neither sudden nor abrupt but was the natural outcome of their friendship. So perhaps we might re-imagine just what it is that Jesus is calling these first disciples to be and do: *fishers of people*. And that implies *relationships*.

Now, for me this metaphor of fishing for people, doesn't jive well with me. I am not a fisher... I don't really like to fish.... I am not a fan of touching the worm, nor the fish that is on my hook. So how can I truly feel like I too am called just like Simon and Andrew? Jesus' invitation to his first disciples was specific and particular, rooted in the language, culture, and vocation they knew best. What metaphor would make more sense to four fishermen than the metaphor of fishing for people? Simon and Andrew would have understood the nuances of that metaphor in ways I never will. James and John knew from years of hard experience what depths of patience, resilience, and intuition professional fishing requires. These men knew the tools of the trade, the limitations of their bodies and the potential dangers. Most of all, they knew the water. They knew how to respect it, how to listen to it, and how to bring forth its best in due time. When Jesus called these tried-and-true fishermen to follow him, they understood the call not as a directive to leave their experience and intelligence behind, but to bring the best of their core selves forward — to become even more fully and freely themselves. Therefore, We're not supposed to heed his call "in general," as if Christianity comes in a number of pre-packaged, cookie-cutter shapes we have to pummel ourselves into. If we're going to follow him at all, we'll have to do it in the unique particulars of the lives, communities, cultures, families, and vocations we find ourselves in. We'll have to trust that God prizes our intellects, our memories, our backgrounds, our educations, our skills, and that he will multiply, shape, and bring to fruition everything we offer up to him in faith from the daily stuff of our lives. "*I will make you,*" he tells the fishermen. I will take, cultivate, deepen, magnify, purify, protect, and perfect the people God created you to be. Through this understanding of our own worthy identity,

we then can live into our calls of relationship --
with Jesus, with each other, and with all the various people they will meet over the next few
years and, indeed, the rest of our lives.

Jesus call to us -- to be in genuine and real relationships with the people around us,
bearing each other's burdens, caring for each other, holding onto each other through thick and
thin, always with the hope and promise of God's abundant grace.

So maybe I should re-state with the theme I started with this way:

*Jesus called ordinary people right in the middle of their ordinary lives to be in relationship with
the ordinary people all around them and through that did extraordinary things ... and still is
doing extraordinary things.*

So now what? Does this mean we have to go out and evangelize?

*Are you going to make us all go out and fish for people and make them come to worship here at
St. Mark?*

Make you all step outside your comfort zones?

NO....

What strikes me most as I think about Jesus calling Simon, Andrew, James, and John into lives
of discipleship, is how familiar and close-to-home his call actually was.

Jesus did not invite them to abandon who they were; he invited them to become their most
authentic, God-ordained selves.

He invited them to live into the fullness of the person they were born to be.

BUT,

I don't mean to suggest that discipleship won't require sacrifice, or change, or risk.

It will.

But I am convinced these days that God is gentler with us than we are with ourselves.

The spiritual transformations that have had the most traction and power in my life have been the
ones that also feel the most organic,
the most ordinary, the most close-to-home.

Leaning into the relationships with people that fill my bucket, and I fill theirs.... Simply because
of who we are.

It's about abundant and authentic *life*.

Most importantly, it is a promise *from God to us* — not from us to God.

As Barbara Brown Taylor so aptly puts it, the story of this Gospel is a miracle story.

Jesus calls, and the four fishermen “immediately” follow.

No hesitation, no questions asked.

Is this because they're men of superhuman courage or prophetic foreknowledge?

Of course not.

These are the same guys who later in the Gospels doubt, deny, and abandon Jesus.

They're as human and as ordinary as the rest of us.

So...they immediately follow Jesus *because Jesus makes it possible for them to do so*.

“This is not a story about us,” Taylor writes.

“It is a story about God, and about God's ability not only to call us but also to create us as people
who are able to follow — able to follow because we cannot take our eyes off the one who calls
us,

because we see him in the relationships we build with others.... The ordinary people we see and
meet in our day to day.

because he seems to know how to take the ordinary to create moments of extraordinary.

These four men “immediately” left their nets and followed Jesus.

Entered into relationship with him

In time, they made the Gospel their own, sharing its radical power through the details of their own lives and stories.

What is the Gospel according to you?

What is *your* Good News, and how will you share it in the turbulent waters of your particular time and place?

As we sing our next hymn... listen to the question being asked...

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?

How will you answer God’s call?