

## " A Call Needing Processing"

(A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. C. Wayne Hilliker at Chalmers United Church Kingston)

**Resonating scripture: Mark 1: 14-20**

**Jan. 14,2018.**

*At such a time as this, in such a place as this, and on such an occasion as this, for me to speak at all, is to speak in the name of the God who has created us, who sustains us, and who always waits to empower us.*

The story is told of a young rabbi who was encountering a serious problem in his congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition.

Nothing the rabbi said or did moved toward solving the impasse. Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's 99-year-old founder.

He met the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles.

'*So tell me*' the young rabbi pleaded, '*was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?*'

"*No*", answered the old rabbi.

'*Ah*', responded the younger man, '*then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?*'

"*No*," answered the old rabbi.

'*Well*', the young rabbi responded, '*what we have is complete chaos!*

*Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream.*'

"*Ah*," said the old man, "*that was the tradition.*"

The stark truth of the gospel story from our tradition is that when Jesus said '*follow me*' he apparently wasn't concerned that these followers might not turn out to be model disciples. Indeed, as the gospel accounts reveal, these disciples were often dense and hard to teach.

Even on the rare occasions when they did understand him they would usually try to talk him out of his ideas. They quarreled about who was greatest. And no one stuck around when the going was tough. Jesus simply said, '*Follow me*,' ...and somehow, the way he said it, moved them to decide that whatever Jesus had to offer was worth leaving their old lives for.

In this story, as far as Jesus was concerned, their willingness to get up and follow were credentials enough. He would make his community out of this diverse, contentious dozen. And so he did. And so here we are. But such a call to follow Jesus, is a word that needs some kind of processing.

It is good to remember, how we, within our own tradition, approach the Bible. It is because we take the bible seriously that we do not take it literally. Thus the need to discover the posture of hearing truth in biblical stories that are not, and perhaps, never were intended to be taken literally. A biblical story doesn't need to be factual, in order to convey truth. In addition, we hold the bible accountable to the message of Jesus, we do not hold Jesus accountable for everything in the bible. Sometimes I think that perhaps the greatest threat to Christian discipleship is a supernatural vision of Jesus that we can only worship but never follow.

To be a disciple today requires NOT the embrace of a particular ideology about Jesus, but the resolve necessary to live by a new ethic---The 'Jesus ethic' which is the Jesus Way, ie. the way that Jesus and his teachings steers us in a particular ethical direction. The Jesus Way are the parables that invite us to ponder and welcome the amazing grace and unconditional love of God as pointed to in his parables and teachings. The ministry of Jesus, was, and is, and will always be about compassion---pure unbridled, reckless compassion.

In that sense, the bible is not a hitching post but rather a sign post. We do not worship the finger, but what the finger is pointing to. There is a lot of scripture that is no longer authoritative for us when it does not reflect

the love seen and embodied in the face and heart and teachings of Jesus. But that is a whole other topic to explore, or critique, in and of itself.

So back to our story. If you have ever been to the Holy Land, you will recall that the Sea of Galilee is more the size of a lake than an ocean. About 13 miles long and 8 miles wide. The way Mark tells this story, Jesus is simply walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, when he stops to talk to two fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew, who are casting a net into the sea.

At that time, the fish were caught in a number of ways — by drag nets in boats or by casting nets when you were fishing from the shore. The casting nets were circular, up to nine feet across. Around the circumference of the nets were pellets of lead and a draw rope so that fish could be brought onto the shore. So here we have 2 brothers, Andrew and Simon, standing in the water, casting their nets...probably with all the skill of a rodeo cowboy tossing lassos.

Passing by, Jesus calls out to them and says, *“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”* And immediately they leave their nets and follow him.

Then, as Mark tells this story, Jesus goes a little further, and sees two other brothers, James and John, who are in their boat with their father Zebedee, mending the nets. Immediately Jesus calls out to them. With their father in the boat with some other hired help, the 2 brothers, drop everything, leave their father behind and follow Jesus!

How easy it is to overlook a minor character in the story, namely Zebedee. One can't help wondering why, Zebedee, the father of two of the sons, didn't come along? Though I know this is not what this story appears to be about, yet, in a peculiar kind of way, Zebedee stands out in this passage as the one who does not respond, While four spring to their feet, one hesitates. Four drop their nets. One isn't quite ready to let go. This isn't to beat up on poor old Zebedee. It's not about trying to make him look bad next to his sons, whom one commentator describes as the *‘two poster boys of Christian enthusiasm’*.

But I think to focus on Zebedee is important because if we are honest, he is the one that we most relate to. I believe it is true to say that most of us, however haltingly try to be followers of Jesus. Thus, when we hear this biblical story, we right away start feeling more than a little bit guilty. For few among us are willing to respond to a call that says, *‘leave everything behind’* and follow me.

If I am honest about my own life, and the lives of most of the people that I know, the plain truth is that all of us move, for the most part, within well-worn patterns. We get up in the morning, and go through the predictable actions and then proceed with other predictable or unpredictable happenings that impinge upon our daily work or home routine.

Suzanne Guthrie, is an Episcopal or Anglican priest and writer. When reflecting on her life and her work within the church, she once wrote:

*‘My work as a parish priest ...does not at all evoke the adventure of the call of the disciples, who immediately left their nets to follow Jesus into the unknown.  
I preach polite sermons to the already-converted and I pray with the sick.  
I do the least and no more than what any (caring) neighbour would do.  
....There are women and men who live in daily danger, who do heroic works, who exhaust themselves for God. Perhaps I, too, will be called to be heroic someday...  
In the meantime, I rush around within these small circles of modest discipleship with what I hope is faithfulness.’*

Isn't that the truth for most of us ! We *‘rush around within...small circles of modest discipleship with what*

*we hope is faithfulness.*’ And yet, even in the midst of lives lived in modest discipleship, it seems the Spirit of God seeks to break in to call us to act and live lives in more faithful ways.

When you stop to think about it the strangest thing in the telling of Mark’s story is the way that these four fishermen actually followed Jesus. According to how the story is told, there was nothing hard about it at all. Jesus called and they followed. Period. No angst, no torn hearts, no backward glances. They just dropped what was in their hands and went after him, without saying a single word.

It was not as if these two sets of brothers, decided something. By telling it this way, the storyteller is really implying that it is more like something happened to them. G.K. Chesterton may have had such moments in mind when he wrote:

*“An adventure is, by its nature, a thing that comes to us.  
It is a thing that chooses us, not a thing we choose.”*

Barbara Brown Taylor, a biblical teacher, writer, and preaching mentor of mine, is someone who often sees, and hears and discovers a different twist of meaning in scripture. On this passage she comments:

*‘If you ask me, this is not a hero story but a miracle story, as full of God’s power as the feeding of the five thousand or the raising of the dead.’*

I think she is right. Whatever the way you might understand biblical miracles, listen to the language of other miracle stories:

*“Be made clean”* Jesus said to the leper,  
...and immediately he was made clean.

*“Stand up, take your mat and go to your home,”* he said to the paralyzed man,  
and the man stood up and immediately took his mat and went home.

*“Go, your faith has made you well,”* he said to the blind man,  
...and immediately he regained his sight.

*“Follow me,”* Jesus said, and immediately they left their nets and followed him.

This then is NOT a story about the power of human beings to choose to change their lives. Rather, this is a story about the mysterious presence of a moving Spirit of God which can encounter us in such a way--that faith and trust are created where there was no faith, and where disciples are created where there were none just a moment before.

This then is not a story about us. This is a story about God. To look at it any other way, is to twist it into a tall tale about four courageous people who sacrificed all to serve a Stranger. Now, it is true that that these four brothers gave up a lot in that moment, but their minds were not on what they were leaving ...but on what they were reaching out to find. And in the moment of their turning to follow, the miracle occurred---the miracle was their sudden grasp that standing before them was someone who knew their deepest hunger, and so they followed. If they did anything under their own power at all, it was simply allowing themselves to follow the promptings of the Spirit of God which was speaking to their inner restlessness. The Spirit of God acted ...and the disciples let their nets wash out to sea.

There is also a sense in the story that Zebedee, the father who remained fishing, serves as a cautionary figure. He becomes a reminder that you and I are not called to stay in the boat our whole life. James Baldwin has written: *“Any real change implies the break-up of the world as one has always known it...the end of safety.”*

The truth is that change suggests risk. And isn't that what an adventure is--- '*risking with a purpose.*' Having said that, however, change, can be hard. When you think about it, we don't fear change in and of itself. There are lots of changes to the familiar that we welcome. What we do fear is loss. If we sense more losses than gains then we find it difficult to get excited about the changes—be they in our home, our work, or in our church.

But as followers of Jesus, we are confronted in this story with the realization that there is an abiding Spirit that is beckoning us on the shore, to brave a new direction. Recognizing all of this, I am not sure that following Jesus is always a matter of leaving everything behind. For if this story is really about coming up against, in small or large ways, a claim upon our lives, then it will result in different ways that we live out that claim in our own lives, wherever our feet take us. It will be a different story for every one of us.

Sometimes following may mean staying at home. It may mean taking care of Zebedee when he gets too old or too unwell to fish. Sometimes following may mean casting the same old nets in a new way, or for new reasons. It may mean doing something different with the fish you catch. It may mean doing less every day, not more...so that there is time to watch, to listen, to ponder, to meditate or to pray.

And when we ponder just who are the followers of Jesus, we soon realize that Jesus' example of fishing is the absolute opposite of angling just for one kind of fish. In this story, the 'Jesus net' is a net that catches a little bit of everything. Mind you, the church has sometimes tried to ignore ...or even censor the diversity in this net. Despite such attempts, the evidence for diversity is never far from us. We just have to look around us! Messy church we call it. Right on!

Those who study the early church and examine church history, point out that our unity as Christians has never been based on agreement. Rather it has been based on mutual concern for the things of Christ and that includes the varied ways his call to discipleship has been and can be heard. I love the way one writer has described this diversity in the 'Jesus net':

Some of us are **small fry**,  
...caught in the middle of the net surrounded by larger fish.

Some of us are **flying fish**,  
...flashy performers who show glory for all to see.

Some of us are **very old and grey** and have swum the great depths that life has to offer.

Some of us are **catfish**, stirring up the bottom, keeping others alive, alert, and moving.

Some of us are **eels** who dart through this place a few times a year,  
not wishing to stay here for very long.

Some are **gentle dolphins**, playful companions.

Some are **sardines** wondering how to commit ourselves to being a follower  
...when we labour so hard just to avoid being eaten.

Some of us **don't feel alive enough** to qualify as fish right now,  
...more like **seaweed** thrown in for flavour.

There are some of us who are **turtles**  
...who are shy and act slowly, but determined.

And yes, a few of us are **sharks**,  
... darting around, and sometimes scaring the others.

Having described the diverse catch in the net in that way, it would be quite a lively discussion to share in a group where you would place yourself on that list...and where others, from their experience, might place you!

What I do know is that there is a need to cherish all of these fish in the net, and to consider each of them as endangered species which add a certain vitality and reality to the mix. But with such a great catch of fish, all hands are needed.

Followers of Jesus, thus the church, must be as diverse as the catch. Each one of us has something the God of holy mystery and holy love, wants to use.

If not a boat then a bus,  
...it maybe a computer or an oven,  
...a drafting table or a bank account,  
...a saw or a broom,  
... a paintbrush or a musical instrument,  
...a dance or a song,  
...a voice or a poem  
....a visit or a listening ear.  
...a lesson taught or a lesson learned.

Perhaps what is most needed are the attitudes and wisdom of those who have had a long history of service and experience. For some of us it may be offering the depth of our patience, or our ability to do many things at once. It may be our willingness to widen the circles of our compassion...or our courage to stand up for fairness. It may be responding to an inner call to open our wallets for coalitions that work for peace and justice.

Whatever the case may be, this very week, the Sacred Presence will interrupt our daily routine to call us again to discipleship.

We probably make no greater mistake than deciding to block our ears to that claim and instead decide to do nothing because we can only do a little. Let us today be so bold as to celebrate our unity as followers of Jesus, however haltingly our discipleship may be.

For this chosen One of God ...this One who came to satisfy our yearnings for who God is and how God is toward us.... this is the One who casts a wide net, and the One who has, on one way or another, caught us all.

Let us pray:  
O patient, persistent, and pursuing God, your still small voice calls us again and again to move  
... from faithlessness to faithfulness,  
...from selfishness to self-sharing,  
...from grudge bearing to forgiving,  
..from living in the past to embracing the present.

May the breath of your spirit so refresh and renew every part of our being ...that our hands will better serve you,  
...our lips more often praise you,  
...and our hearts more consistently love you. Amen

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