

## Follow Me

I heard a story about two buddies who set out on a week-long fishing trip. They rent all the equipment: the rods, the reels, the waders, the rowboat, the pick-up truck—even a cabin in the woods. Everything they need. They go to considerable expense.

The first day they go fishing, but they don't catch anything. The same thing happens on the second day, and on the third day. It goes on like this until finally, on the last day of their vacation, one of them manages to catch a fish.

As they drive back home, they're kind of depressed. One guy turns to the other and says, "Do you realize that this one lousy fish we caught cost us fifteen hundred dollars? And the other guy says, "Wow! It's a good thing we didn't catch any more!"

Well. In today's gospel narrative, we hear about some other fishermen. Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. James and his brother John. Now, unlike the two guys who caught only one fish, these two pairs of brothers aren't out there just for a little recreational fishing. No. They're commercial fishermen. They're

in the business of fishing. It's their work. It's their vocation. It's what they do. It's what they do every day.

But this day is different. The story of this day is so familiar that we know it by heart. Yet because it's not only about long-ago fishermen, but also about you and me, the story of this day can speak to us afresh—just as though we were hearing it for the first time.

This day would probably be featured if you were making a movie of the life of the One who approaches the fishermen. This would be an important scene in the movie, wouldn't it? If you were the director, how would you shoot this scene? Would it be a golden lakeshore morning? Would the water mirror the color of the blue, blue Galilean sky? Would the sun be climbing up into the heavens as the fishermen go about their work?

I think the camera might focus first on the stranger on the shore. Moving through wind-rustled beach grasses. Coming closer. Pausing. Stopping. Seeing these seasoned fishermen. His dark eyes fixing on them. For a long time.

And sensing a presence, they look up from their labor. And see *him*. A solitary figure. One they've never met before. One who has the kindest eyes they've ever seen. Intent eyes that look

at them as though he knows everything about them. Several moments pass before he speaks. When he does, his words are like none they have ever heard.

*You've been catching perch and bass. But I'll show you how to catch men and women. Follow me.*

*Follow me.* As we reflect this Sunday on what it means to follow Jesus, there's something we need to understand. First-century rabbis don't normally go looking for disciples. The would-be disciple, the applicant, typically seeks out the teacher. But these fishermen are—quite literally—minding their own business. They haven't set out in search of Jesus. He finds *them*. Comes to them. Speaks to them. Calls them.

So Matthew's first readers would surely consider this event extraordinary. And for *all* of Matthew's readers—including us—what happens next is in the realm of the miraculous.

Because Matthew tells us that at least some of these fishermen are working on their nets. Mending their nets. Now nets don't need to be mended unless they've been torn. And nets don't get torn unless they've been filled with fish! So we know these fishermen are doing well. Running a successful operation on Lake Galilee. A thriving, profitable enterprise. But they set it

aside. They turn their backs on it. They leave their livelihood behind.

And that's not all they leave behind. One of the central commands of the Law—in their culture, one of the most serious responsibilities—is the care of parents. But Matthew reports that at the lakeshore, James and John walk away from their father Zebedee. And they don't look back.

Amazingly, these fishermen just go. James and John. Andrew and Simon Peter. They leave their boats and go. They don't hesitate. They don't stop to discuss it. They don't consult with one another. They don't weigh the pros and cons. They don't request an itinerary or a timeline. When Jesus calls, they go. Immediately! Following him as he preaches and teaches. As he heals and cures. All through Galilee.

Jesus has gone back to Galilee. Maybe knowing something about the backstory of the place will deepen our understanding of what following him is all about. Today's Scriptures offer a clue.

After growing up in Nazareth, Jesus has traveled to be baptized by John in the Jordan. And Jesus has been tempted in the wilderness. Both of those places are much closer to

Jerusalem, the epicenter of Jewish faith, than they are to that distant outback known as Galilee. But with intentionality, Jesus decides to return to this place where Herod Antipas has arrested John. Jesus returns to this territory where Herod wields power. Jesus returns to Galilee.

Centuries before his birth, people in the tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali had lived in darkness—but not by choice. In their day, the forces of empire had elected to wage their wars in this region so that—in their view—nothing valuable or important would be destroyed. It was a crossroads kind of place, the kind of place you go through on your way to somewhere else. The victorious warlords had intentionally settled this area with peoples from a number of different ethnic groups and nations so that the population would remain weak and divided, rather than becoming strong and united and able to rise up against an oppressive regime.

These people had experienced the brutality, the suffering, the darkness of war. Because they were, for the most part, non-Jews, this region came to be called “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Now Galilee actually means *district*. So this was the district of the Gentiles. According to Isaiah, the Galilee of the nations. It

had come to be known simply as Galilee, well before the time of Matthew.

Whose Gospel recalls Isaiah's prophecy. Seismic change is coming! The inhabitants of a darkened world will see a wondrous light. A saving light! In Galilee, where Scripture is fulfilled. In Galilee, where Jesus chooses to be in ministry to a particular people. In Galilee, where Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming a coming kingdom.

There's an urgency to his message. There's an urgency to the need to follow him. There's no time to waste. God's inbreaking reign comes at you fast. And you can't wait to be a part of it! In Jesus himself, the kingdom of heaven draws near.

There's something compelling about him. There's something incredibly powerful about his word. There's something that induces ordinary fishermen to follow him with no questions asked—and to show you and me what following him looks like. There's something about him that catches people up in him. There's something that catches *you* up in him.

When he comes to you. Just as Jesus comes to the fishermen—and not the other way around—so too, Jesus comes to you. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Discipleship is not

an offer [a person] makes to Christ.” The initiative is Christ’s. The grace is Christ’s. The call is Christ’s. He calls fishermen to follow him. And he calls *you*. Not just once in your life, but again and again.

Maybe when you first began following Jesus, you thought it was your own idea. That’s what *I* thought, when I first started hearing a call. But I was mistaken.

Because when Christ calls, the desire to follow is instilled in you by the Holy Spirit. Encouraging you. Nudging you. Moving you in the direction you were created to go.

When you hear him calling, *follow me*. You don’t know *why* he’s calling *you* to follow. You don’t know what use you could possibly be to Christ. But, my sisters and brothers, he *will* use you to help build his coming kingdom. He will use every gift and ability and skill and talent that you have. And he will equip you with everything else you’ll need.

When you hear him calling, *follow me*. You don’t know *how long* he’ll want you to follow him. He doesn’t provide an explanation or a schedule. He doesn’t tell you that it’s only for a specific period of time and no longer. He invites you to put your feet on the path he’s walking. And that is enough.

When you hear him calling, *follow me*. You don't know *where* he's leading. You may suspect that he's leading you into Galilee. But you can be confident in the knowledge that Christ goes ahead of you into Galilee. Into *your* Galilee, wherever that might be. Into contemporary Galilees.

Christ leads you into Galilees where you might not wish to go. He leads you not into centers of culture and affluence and influence, but into places most people regard as unimportant. He leads you into out-of-the-way places.

And he leads you to out-of-the-way *people*. To people this world considers insignificant. To people who are oppressed and dispossessed. To people who are immigrants and refugees. To people the powers that be have cast out and forgotten. If you follow Jesus Christ, he will lead you to people who have been walking in darkness. And these people will see a great light: the light of Christ shining through *you*!

The light of this One who calls *follow me*.

Beloved, following Jesus means growing into his likeness. Following Jesus means doing what Jesus does. Following Jesus means fishing for people. Following Jesus means making disciples. Following Jesus means proclaiming the good news of



his kingdom that is already present but not yet fully accomplished. And following Jesus means living out the message of that kingdom: living as though you understand that your life is the only sermon some people will ever hear. Following Jesus means living as his instrument of compassion and kindness and caring.

*Follow me.* Words to the fishermen. Words from the lakeshore. Wonder-filled words that echo through twenty centuries. Still today, your Lord is calling. Speaking your name. Can you hear? Are you ready to go with him?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.