

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 29, 2017
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Amos 3:1-8
Psalm 139:1-17
I Corinthians 1:10-17
Matthew 4:12-23

As I wrestled with the Gospel lesson this week, I found myself somewhat disturbed. The problem, for me, is not so much what the text says as it is what it *doesn't* say. I feel as though I've been left out of a good part of a conversation, a conversation involving Jesus, some commercial fishermen, and a lake.

Matthew tells us that as Jesus begins his ministry, he finds himself one day on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He comes upon Andrew and his brother, Peter, and says to them: “come and be my disciples, and I'll show you how to fish for people.”

A little farther up the shore he finds James and John, mending their nets with their father, Zebedee. He issues the same call to them as well.

In both cases, the response is the same. The men drop what they are doing, and they take up shop with Jesus. In the case of Andrew and Peter it happens “at once.” In the case of James and John, it happens “immediately.”

Try as I might, I just don't get it. Surely, I am missing something.

How can these four men so *quickly* and *willingly* leave what they are doing to follow Jesus? It seems a bit hasty to me. Seems a bit reckless, even, that these

men would leave behind their jobs, their livelihoods, and even turn their backs on the family business which they are destined to continue.

I can almost hear Zebedee, exasperated and smelling of fish, shouting at his boys as they start walking along the shore: “Hey, what do you knuckle heads think you’re doing? Where do you think you’re going? You can’t just walk off and leave like this! Who’s going to run the business?”

And it would not be enough for just Zebedee to be concerned. I’d like to think that Andrew, Peter, James and John themselves would be a little apprehensive about all this. You’d think that they would want to interrogate Jesus, to ask some questions, to get at the “wheres” and “whys” and stuff like that. To kick the tires a bit before they just drop their nets and accept Jesus’ offer. To read the contract and the fine print.

But they don’t. And I’m left wondering what I’m missing. What am I not being told? Has there been some prior encounter with Jesus by these men? That would help this to make a little more sense, but unfortunately the text does not indicate such. The text here is simply matter-of-fact and very blunt: *Immediately* they leave their nets and follow Jesus. *At once* they decide to make a change. Period.

What could possess these men to so abruptly leave the life they knew in order to follow someone they did not know?

Maybe we should also ask how persons today can just lay aside life as they know it in order to follow what they believe to be a call from Jesus.

It's been nearly seven years ago now since the tiny country of Haiti was torn asunder by a powerful earthquake. When the earthquake happened, there was a young woman who lived in Miami and had a good job as a physical therapist. In an interview with NPR, she recalled that on the day the quake happened, something happened inside her. She knew what she must do.

She went home, and her father looked at her and said, "You're going to Haiti, aren't you?" The next morning she went to work, quit her job, and didn't look back. How is it that a person does that?

I thought again this week about our friend, Dr. Tom Kraner. What is it that motivated Tom Kraner, a successful surgeon, to embark for the vicious and volatile land of Afghanistan several years ago and to bring healing and help to persons there in the midst of dangerous and deplorable conditions?

Why would business owners and factory workers and school teachers today take their annual vacations and spend them in Africa digging wells so that villages can have clean water?

I don't know.

I think it must have something to do with Jesus.

In the case of Andrew, Peter, James and John, it had *everything* to do with Jesus. It had everything to do with this man who sought them out one day while they were on the job.

You see, conventional practice dictated that when persons wanted to become a follower of a respected teacher, *they sought the teacher* out and asked for permission to become a disciple. But in this case, these men don't seek Jesus. *Jesus seeks them.*

In a world where people constantly seek to *find* meaning in life, whether it be happiness, success, or peace, maybe these men saw something in Jesus. Maybe it was easy for them to lay everything aside because when they looked into Jesus' eyes, they realized that what they had been seeking in life was actually *seeking them*. Maybe they were able to leave it all behind because they had an "epiphany," an "aha" moment, where it dawned on them that the secret of life is not in *finding anything, but in being found*.

In the end, the text doesn't tell me *why* these men laid everything aside to follow Jesus. I am simply left to conclude that there was something about this man Jesus, something so compelling that grown men could go from *fishermen* to *fishers of men* before their afternoon coffee break was over.

I kept asking myself this week, "How could James and John leave their father's family business in order to get involved in their *Father's* family business?"

By accident, I began to read the verses that immediately follow our lesson today. What I discovered stopped me in my tracks. In verse 24 and following, Matthew tells us that Jesus went about preaching and ministering throughout the area. And then it says that he healed persons of every kind of brokenness -- persons with illness, persons in pain, persons suffering possession and emotional trauma, persons racked with seizures, persons numbed with paralysis. Whatever form of brokenness afflicted the body or mind, Jesus touched and healed it.

And then I had a small epiphany. Then the “aha” came. The answer to my question, “How could James and John, Andrew and Peter lay it all aside and follow this man?”

They could lay it all aside and follow this man because standing in front of them was proof that God loves people -- broken, sinful, hurting people -- more than anything. God is in the people business. People matter to God. *They* mattered to God.

And *you* also matter to God. How much, you ask? This much:

*“Lord, you have searched me out and know me;
You know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts
from afar.
You trace my journeys and my resting places and are acquainted with
all my ways.
Indeed, there is not a word on my lips but you, O Lord, know it altogether.
You press upon me behind and before and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain
to it.*

*Where then can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?
If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.
If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there your hand will lead me and your right hand hold me fast.”*
(Psalm 139:1-9)

This is the kind of love that seeks us out and invites us to follow, even as it did those four men on shore of the Sea of Galilee.

What would possess any of us to lay aside what we are seeking in life in order to heed that call?

I'm not sure. But as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table this morning, I offer you these words of invitation:

*And you, good Christians, one and all who would follow Jesus' way,
Come leave behind what keeps you bound to trappings of our day,
And listen as he calls your name to come and follow near,
For still he speaks in varied ways to those his call will hear:
“Leave all things you have, and come, and follow me.”*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit? Amen.