

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
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By
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Matthew 4:12-23
Come and See; Follow Me.

I have always thought that it was amazing that Jesus would say follow me and the fishermen would just drop their nets and go. However, the gospel from John last week told of the meeting of two of John the Baptist's disciples and Jesus. John the Baptist told his disciples that Jesus was the Lamb of God, the one whom he had been telling them about; the one who would be baptizing with the Holy Spirit; the one who is the Son of God. When John the Baptist pointed Jesus out, John's disciples followed Jesus, spoke with him, and stayed with him that day. Jesus invited Andrew and Simon Peter to "Come and See". They didn't have to jump in with both feet. They could observe, listen, and decide. Later Philip and Nathanael were introduced to Jesus. Oral history retold and written by different apostles results in slightly different details, but it is very probable that the men who would be called by Jesus to be disciples had had previous encounters with him and had heard of his teaching and healing.

In Matthew's gospel for today, Jesus gives a different directive. Instead of "Come and See", he tells Andrew and Simon Peter to "Follow Me". They dropped their nets and followed him. James and John, also fishermen, were mending nets with their father Zebedee. They too, responded to the call and followed Jesus. Zebedee may also have been called for discipleship, not to follow Jesus physically, but to stay home and continue fishing. His calling is similar to ours, not having the physical relationship that was possible for the Biblical disciple, but still changing a life because of an encounter with Jesus. We are not all called to leave our daily business, or to leave our families. That may be our ministry. However, we are called to separate ourselves from sin, and to teach what Jesus taught. The disciples went from one kind of life to another. They moved from the profit side of life to the not for profit side. They worked for others, not knowing the source of their salary or their sustenance. "Follow Me" is a command to change one's life through the exercise of the will, renouncing all evil, breaking up bad habits, taking on good habits, and loving God and neighbor.

Jesus and his disciples went about Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, preaching, and healing. He would tell the people to "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." Repent is not a negative word. It is a word of growth, education and experience. To repent is to rethink, reconsider, realign one's attitude and particular stance on a whole range of religious doctrine and practice. For a nation and for people who believed that they were divinely righteous, by birth, this was a radical and confrontational message. Repentance is a desire to know the truth and to do better, to turn around on the road, to change one's mind. Confession and making amends for sin become something one must do if the change of direction is to stick. Repentance is change-- a change from my direction towards God's. Dwight Eisenhower said "Any change is implied criticism of the past." When we suggest that people repent, turn around, we are asking them to change, thus implying that what they've been doing has been wrong in some way.

Change has been the mantra of political campaigns this year. The candidates, Romney, Hucklebee, McCain, and Paul on the Republican side, and Obama, Clinton, and Edwards on the Democratic side are constantly telling us "I am the candidate of change. Listen to my plan and vote for me. I will change everything for the better." Remember Martin Luther King in his birthday month. He also had a plan to change society for the better in a non-violent way. He achieved many improvements in civil rights through change. He also marched and protested the Vietnamese War and worked with other groups for change. Change is not always comfortable. We tend to resist change, frequently preferring the status-quo. However, it is obvious, especially in Michigan, that the status-quo is not working. We must seek new ideas and new industries to bolster the economy and improve the situations of our residents.

Susan Harries wrote about change at St. James' in the current issue of the Chimes. She explained seasonal changes in liturgy and music and encouraged us all to be open to new ideas and ways as we proceed. Sometimes the wider church has a narrow focus for its ministry. The church is called to engage the world—all of it. It is called to move beyond its often parochial vision of ministry. We need a new vision in the church such that we truly engage the world in a kind of dialogue on the real issues in life that matter to all of us. Issues involving how we relate to other religions, issues involving sexuality and a woman's right to choose vs. a right to life, issues involving terrorism, gun control, and the right to bear arms. There are so many adult issues to which Christianity brings a perspective. There are issues which are very important for our young people as well—peer pressure, drugs, alcohol, eating disorders, bullying, grade pressure, finances. What better place to quietly try to bring together the different opinions and understand one another than the church. Just as for those early fishermen, we need to have our sights raised with a fresh vision about what engagement with other people whose ideas, whose heritage, whose lifestyles are different than ours really means.

Grant Cornwell, president of the College of Wooster in Ohio, gave some excellent advice in an address that he gave students last fall. He said: "You have the responsibility to develop your skills in writing, in speaking, but perhaps most of all in listening. Listen for differences. Seek them out. Don't surround yourself only with those who see the world as you

do.” This is a message that should resonate for voters also. Seek out the differences in the candidates and their policy plans. Truly, a troubling combination of problems faces the nation—health care, war, the economy, education and the environment. Don’t rest in the comfort of candidates from a particular party. Instead, seek out the differences—different parties, different ideas, different solutions.

David Gushee, Professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University, and president of Evangelicals for Human Rights, wrote an article for USA Today, titled “A plea to evangelicals – from an evangelical”. He is dismayed at the selling out of the evangelicals to one party, based on the two issues of abortion and gay marriage, and not tackling the full range of biblical concerns, which include poverty, oppression, and war. He states that our focus should be on the church’s work, not the state’s. As one aspect of our God-inspired love for our neighbor, we can ask the state and its leaders to do justice, protect life and advance the common good. We can do this in many quite constructive ways, from scholarly work to declarations of principles to activism on specific issues, but we must not be married to a single political party. Instead, we must hold the parties accountable for their efforts or lack thereof in helping the citizens of this country. We as Episcopalians must be concerned with all of the issues and decide accordingly. What are we working toward? What matters to us?

Repent, change, fulfill your ministry.

Jesus' invitation, and the disciples' acceptance of it, marks the beginning of an adventure that continues to this day. Still, it is essential to know that when these men dropped their nets and went with Jesus, they had no illusions. There was not a starry-eyed dreamer in the whole group. There was ample evidence of the probable consequences of what they were undertaking.

Jesus came to these men as they were going about their lives. Not one of them was engaged in an activity that was particularly religious. Indeed, there is little indication that religion occupied much of their time or thought. They were engaged in the day-to-day necessity of providing food and shelter for themselves and their families. Jesus came to them, where they were, as they were. He said to them, "Follow me" and they dropped what they were doing and followed.

Jesus has come to God's people with the same straight-forward invitation from that day to this. Through the centuries, Jesus has called all sorts and conditions of folk. Some were noble persons whose names we remember. Some were common folk whose names we don't remember. Jesus called a rich young man named Augustine, a rich man's son called Francis, and a nun named Teresa. Their experiences of following Jesus continue to echo down the years to us; in their writings and in the communities they inspired.

Jesus calls and people drop whatever they are doing to follow him. Jesus' invitation compels us because it issues out of God's love. Jesus' invitation calls us into community with God and with each other. It urges us to reach beyond ourselves; to risk pushing beyond known, comfortable, limits. When we accept Jesus' invitation, we find that, along with all those who have gone before, we are changed.

We follow because, among other things, we long to have our lives make sense. It is imperative for us to know that our lives have a purpose higher than ourselves. In and through Jesus, we see God's love mediated to us in new and compelling ways. God's love assures us that our lives do, in fact, have a higher purpose; higher even than we would ever dare to dream.

We all have to discover our purpose, our ministry. We are all not going to go off to seminary training, but what are we going to do? That is the “call” that Jesus lays on us all. Repent and Follow Me.

Resources:

USA Today, Jan.14, 2008

AARP Bulletin, Jan.-Feb. 2008

Episcopal Sermons That Work