

January 26, 2020
“Following Jesus”
Matthew 4:12-23
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

I am not a social media person. Fifteen years ago I was early in my new job as a campus minister at Drexel when I created, purely out of professional obligation because it's where the students were, a My Space account. And a Facebook account. This was back when both forums were relatively new, Facebook just a year old, when to even create an account you had to have an “edu” email address.

There was a practical motivation and benefit to dive into these technological connections, but I was not a social media person then. And I am not a social media person now.

Nonetheless, I invite your suspension of disbelief so we can consider this story of Jesus calling the first disciples in a contemporary context. A social media context.

Simon and his brother Andrew are busy, as always, fishing along the Sea of Galilee. Jesus approaches and says to them, simply and matter-of-factly: “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

“Sure, why not?” they say. And as Jesus continues on they drop their fishing nets for a moment, pull out their smart phones and sign up to follow Jesus . . . on social media.

Before long their Twitter, Facebook and Instagram feeds start lighting up:

- “Teaching in the synagogue this morning, preaching the gospel.” - #goodnews
- “Healed a demoniac and a paralytic today – word is getting out. People are bringing their sick and diseased to me.” #newlife
- They see a post with two pictures of the same man – one showing a withered hand, one with that hand restored. “Healed this man on the Sabbath – scribes and Pharisees not happy.” #beforeandafter #dogoodnotharm #rulesworthbreaking
- Then a selfie of Jesus with a Samaritan woman, holding her water jar, standing next to a well, both smiling. “Look who I ran into today!” #livingwater

- And another picture at the temple showing a bunch of overturned tables and coins all over the floor: “The temple is not a marketplace!” #denofthieves #templeisforprayingnotpaying
- And still another post showing Jesus in the foreground, holding five loaves of barley bread and two fish, with a crowd of thousands in the background. #enoughforall
- “Off to the mountain to pray – it’s been a really long week.” sleepy face emoji, #downtime #loveyourneighborasyourself

They like what they’re seeing and hearing. They become fans of Jesus on Facebook. They hear that he’ll be giving some kind of “sermon on the mount” but don’t want to commit. Too busy, they say, too much work to do. Ever the multi-taskers, they stream the podcast while they’re fishing so they can at least hear what he has to say. #beatitudes

Moved by Jesus’ teaching, they decide to go a step further and join the ‘Disciples of Jesus’ Facebook group, wanting to stay more in the loop about how they might get involved. They get an event invite to join Jesus for an afternoon on a boat. They respond with a “maybe” so as to show interest without, you know, having to lock in. In case they still have work to do, or something better comes up. And besides, the forecast calls for a windstorm. They don’t go.

A few days later they see another invite, this time for dinner. Sounds good, they say, so they respond ‘yes,’ but then notice that the guest list includes mostly tax collectors and “sinners” so they change their response to “no” and eat fish at home instead.

I could go on but you get the point, of course. To follow Jesus, for example, on social media requires nothing, no commitment at all. They can stay connected without having to actually DO anything.

Which brings us to the actual story. Simon and Andrew are indeed casting their nets along the Sea of Galilee when Jesus appears.

Now understand that we have no idea from this account what, if anything, these two fishermen know about Jesus. So why on earth when this virtual stranger shows up and says only, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people,” do they immediately, WITHOUT any hesitation, drop everything? And we’re talking everything: family, livelihood, reputation.

In Matthew's gospel only Jesus' birth narrative, his baptism (which, of course, includes John the Baptizer's testimony about him), and his temptation in the desert precede this story. Mark's account of the actual calling is nearly identical.

According to John's gospel, Simon and Andrew are identified initially as disciples of John the Baptizer, who, while the three of them are together, points to Jesus as the "Lamb of God." And with only John's testimony they followed Jesus. He doesn't even prompt them, they just start following him.

Luke's account tells an altogether different story. Preceded by several healings, including one of Simon's mother-in-law who was suffering with a high fever, this version has Jesus climbing into Simon's fishing boat on the lake of Gennesaret, a local name for the Sea of Galilee.

He asks Simon to put the boat out a little ways and starts teaching the crowds who are still on the shore. He tells Simon to cast out his fishing nets, in spite of Simon's protest that they tried all night and caught nothing. They end up catching so many fish the nets start to break. And with that, we're told that Simon (now called Simon Peter with no explanation in the story itself, unlike John's version where Jesus pronounces the new name) drops everything to follow Jesus. Along with his brother, Andrew, and James and John.

Whatever they may have known or heard or seen for themselves or believed about this Jesus, they don't know much. They know enough.

But what's clear from all accounts is that they have no idea what it actually means, what it will mean, to follow him. What it will require of them. At this moment they don't know that to follow Jesus will render them virtually homeless, nomads moving from village to village. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests," Jesus will say later, "but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

At this moment they don't know that to follow Jesus will put them in conflict, over and over again, with the religious and political establishment. They can't possibly know that to follow Jesus will lead them all the way to the cross, to the worst Rome had to offer. "If any want to become my followers," he will tell them later, "let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me."

Some of you may recall that it is Simon Peter who denies Jesus three times when Jesus is arrested. Too afraid in that moment to even be associated with Jesus, much less follow him.

But at *this* moment, he and his brother Andrew, with only these 10 words from Jesus, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people,” “immediately” drop their nets and follow him. And the same was true for James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who leave not only their nets but their father behind at Jesus’ invitation. And if you read on (chapter 9), the same is also true for Matthew the tax collector, who simply gets up from his tax booth and follows. They act. They commit.

But to what? What does it mean to follow Jesus? And in this case, what does Jesus mean by making them fish for people?

This phrasing is traditionally lifted up as a clarion call to evangelism, and rather aggressive evangelism at that. To cast our proverbial nets into the world and pull as many people as we can into the Christian fold. But in truth, it’s a terrible metaphor for spreading the good news when you consider what fishing is like for the fish.

Instead, I would suggest that Jesus’ words are not about evangelism at all. They are directed to the specific context of these first disciples, these fishermen. It was language with which they were most familiar. Fishing was their life, their livelihood, it’s what they knew. Jesus’ invitation to become fishers of people is for them an invitation to move beyond the narrow scope of their own lives. To move beyond care for *only* their own needs. It is an invitation to extend their vision wider, their concern further, their commitment deeper than the fish right in front of them to the needs of people all around them. It is, I would argue, an invitation to live and love more abundantly. And to seek that abundance for others as much as they seek it for themselves.

So if that is at least part of what it means to follow Jesus, the fact is, we who call ourselves Christians or any of us who intend to take this Jesus’ life and teaching seriously, will often have different answers to the question of what it means to follow Jesus. The answer is not always as clear as we might like it to be, or maybe it is and we just aren’t up for following in those particular footsteps.

What is clear, if you read through the gospels, is that to truly follow Jesus, to live and love more abundantly, will often (always) put you at odds with the powers-that-be, with the values and norms of the larger society – values and norms which, if we're being honest, we can easily end up following instead. Whether by choice or by default.

In a society where individualism is seen as both a necessity and a right, where competition is valued above cooperation, what does it mean to follow the One who washes his disciples feet and says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all"?

In a society where more is *always* better, materialism paramount, what does it mean to follow the One who says, "You cannot serve both God and money." The One who says to the rich young ruler, "Go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor...(only then will) you will have treasure in heaven"?

In a society marked by a frenetic pace and wrought with fear and endless anxiety about the future, what does it mean to follow the One who says, "Do not worry about your life . . . do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own"?

In a nation quick to divide the world into us and them, where love of country demands blind loyalty, what does it mean to follow the One who says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . ."

In a world where finger-pointing prevails in politics and beyond, what does it mean to follow the One who says, "Do not judge lest you be judged . . . Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own?"

In a world where might is right, where vengeance is glorified and violence and war are matters of first resort, what does it mean to follow the One who himself offered forgiveness while enduring the brutality of the cross. The One who says, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer...if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also"?

And in a world where the poor and hungry and homeless and most vulnerable are so often cast aside to fend for themselves, what does it mean to follow the One who himself

was poor and hungry and homeless, who says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did NOT do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me?"

If you claim to follow Jesus what difference does it make in your life? What difference does it make in the world? In the places you live and work. In this community.

We don't always know where the road with Jesus will take us, but we know that it requires our commitment. An ongoing commitment to stand against the flow, to stand in the gap, to resist social and cultural norms that are not life-giving.

If we are to follow Jesus, if we are to follow the way of Christ, we have to act. And as Jesus reminds us over and over and over again, we, like those first disciples, have to be willing to *look* and *live* and *love* beyond the narrow provincialism of our own realities, our own needs. Cast your nets wider, Jesus says. Become fishers of people.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? The question is ours to answer. And it's a question we answer with our lives. What does it mean to follow Jesus in our real, day-to-day lives? In the complexity of our real relationships? With all of our questions and doubts, with all of our joys and struggles. And what does it mean to follow Jesus in the real world, with all of its horror and all of its beauty, with all of its brokenness and all of its promise.

In our families.

In our schools and workplaces.

In our communities and neighborhoods.

On our blocks. On our streets. In our courts and prisons.

On our borders. On behalf of our rivers and oceans and forests and fields.

Among those we love. Among those whom no one loves.

Friends, may we journey together, stumbling like those first disciples, as we no doubt will, but always casting our nets wider, following the radical, revolutionary Jesus toward peace with justice. Toward life MORE abundant and love LESS conditional.

May it be so.