

“Call and Response”

*A sermon preached by Rev. Daniel Smith
At First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
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The Lesson: Mark 1:14-20

There are two things that have always bugged me about this passage from Mark where Jesus is on the shoreline calling his first disciples. The first can be summed up in one word: Immediately. The as-yet unknown Jesus appears to Simon and Andrew and calls out: “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately, we are told, *immediately* they leave their nets and follow him. Just like that. This passage always reminds of an odd story about the comedian Andy Kaufman. Some of you will know it.

Kaufman, a.k.a Latka from the 70’s sitcom *Taxi*, was known as a sometimes obnoxious, often eccentric and always unpredictable entertainer. One evening in 1978, at the very end of a stand-up performance at Carnegie Hall, when he was all riled up and when he had the crowd all riled up, and just when they thought the show was over, he says to them all, “Now, I want to take every one here out for milk and cookies. Follow me, everyone!” And with that, Kaufman jumps off the stage and makes a beeline for the door. And do you know what? ...almost without hesitation, the audience follows him out the door where they are met with 20 yellow school buses that Kaufman had ordered up before the show. They piled on the buses and were taken to a nearby school cafeteria on 49th street where they sat at long tables, drinking milk and eating cookies, compliments of Andy Kaufman. It’s a story I can almost believe! What I have a much harder time believing is that Simon and Andrew would have so quickly, so immediately left it all to follow Jesus. God knows there would be no milk and cookies where they were heading with Jesus!

I had lunch this past week at Charlie’s Kitchen with one of our members David McCann. He shared with me an alternative version of this passage that he wrote awhile back...you know... just because. His take on this passage beautifully captures how strange yet ordinary Jesus must have sounded to those first listeners. He told me I could share it with you. Here’s an excerpt:

“So he went back to Galilee. He spoke about the baptism, and the visions, the forty days in the desert. People were interested, but not that much. He wasn't the only one who had been out there. He said "The kingdom is getting close," and "We are about to tear down the state." People found that a bit threatening, dangerous. "Here it is, so get ready." What is he talking about, they wondered.

He kept moving around, trying to call them.

"Follow me," he said, "and I will make you farmers!" The people listening looked puzzled. "We are farmers," they said, and went back to work.

"Come along, and I will make you merchants of men." "We are merchants," they replied. "Go away. We are busy."

As he was walking past a construction site, he saw several of the laborers cleaning their trowels, and he called "Follow me, and you can be builders of benefits. You can be masons of individuals. You can be plumbers of people." Not one so much as looked up.

In the middle of town, walking through the wonderful aromas of fresh bread he called, "Come with me, and you can be bakers of people!" Farther down the street, where on both sides the sides of meat hung on big hooks he called "Come, and I will make you butchers of people."

The shop keepers, some of them looked puzzled, like the others, while some began to look angry."

Thank you, David. Don't you all love it? Can't you just imagine Jesus stumbling around to find the right marketing pitch, the right catch phrase, if you will, for his message? The way that Mark tells the story, with no account of Jesus birth mind you, Jesus hasn't even made a name for himself yet. "Jesus?" What on earth kind of name is that?" they may have wondered. After his baptism, after the 40 days, he is ready to preach the good news, ready to proclaim that God's Kingdom is near. But who will join him? And what will be his rallying cry? "Follow me, I will make you fishers of people?" What? Truth be told, I've never much liked this phrase. It really just doesn't speak to me. But these strange words of invitation emanate from Jesus' very mouth, and as if hypnotized by them, this group of men *immediately* drop their nets and decide to follow him. "Bingo!", Jesus must have thought, "I've finally got 'em!" He had found the perfect pitch, at least for that crowd. And off they went.

In my mind, this is one of the most unbelievable passages in the bible. Normally, I'd just say that to set you all up to tell you why it's actually the *most* believable but this time, I've got nothing to explain it. The text is sparse. It offers very little help. The disciples don't ask Jesus where they were going, how they would eat, or who would take care of their families. They hardly have a voice of their own. All they knew was that their new job description was going to involve "fishing for people," whatever *that* means. What was it about the encounter with this man from Nazareth that could inspire them to make such a radical move. What did Jesus exude that caused them to stop in their own wakes and instantly change the course of their entire lives? I sometimes wonder if it was sheer good looks? Really! I mean what else could make a person do something so foolish but 'love at first sight'! Unfortunately, Mark gives us no clue here as to what inspired these guys to drop all they had and all they knew and all they loved before. Yet the simple and troubling fact of this passage is that they do.

The promise to become a fisher of people is not what would get me to drop everything. But then again what would? I wonder if in God's great plan there is a custom made line or a phrase that could so hook each of us. For whatever reason, Jesus' words in that moment for those people hooked them right in their guts. They were fishermen. Fishermen. . . fishers of men . . . I can see why it worked for them. But think with me for a moment about what few words, said in just the right place and time, would have the power to bring you in from waters or for that matter to take you out to the desert? Come and follow me! I will make you . . . (fill in the blank) . . . and *immediately*, the people of First Church in Cambridge jumped out of their seats! Have any ideas of how God might turn your life upside down in a sentence? More to the point, do you have any

ideas what God could say to make you instantly, immediately, change the course of your life? Come and follow me, I will make you a step father of two children! Come and follow me, I will make you a caregiver of the dying! Come and follow me, I will make you poor, yet richer than you've ever been! Come and follow me, I will make you a comedian giving milk and cookies to the multitudes! Come and follow me, I will make you a healthcare lobbyist for the state of Massachusetts! Come and follow me, I will make you a leader of the next American revolution! Come and follow me, I will make you... what? What is that custom made promise of God to which you would surrender all resistance and for which you would risk everything? Even if you don't yet know what it is for you specifically, the general terms that Jesus uses can sometimes be equally as powerful: Come and follow me!

Bob Dylan once said on stage at a 1980 concert in Syracuse, "Jesus tapped me on the shoulder and said, Bob, why are you resisting me? I said, I'm not resisting you! He said, You gonna follow me? I said, I've never thought about that before! He said, "When you're not following me, you're resisting me." My guess is that more than a few of us here today would answer the question "You gonna follow me?" in the much the same way as Dylan. Rather than 'call and response', as it is in the worship services of black churches, for us it would be more like 'call and resist'! Let's be honest, how many of us really think about the question Jesus asks Dylan? Sure we think about where God is calling us, but sometimes when we do, we have God confused with a personal trainer, a life coach, or a career counselor, one who feeds us not much the gospel of Jesus Christ, but the gospel of that other J.C., Joseph Campbell, who conveniently tell us "follow *our* bliss!" Think about it. Many of us come to church for the incredible music (especially here!) or for the quiet time during the week. Maybe (hopefully), we come for a little intellectual stimulation or for some inspiration to be a better person, but how many of us could say so directly, "I come to church to follow Jesus." Undoubtedly in this congregation, there are some, many even, who could, would and even do say that, who have a deep sense of what it means to practice the discipleship of Christ. For others though, if we think about that question, "You gonna follow me?" we are thinking about it more than answering it, we are resisting it more than following.

And why do we so often resist? Some of you may feel uncomfortable with the notion that following one religious path is exclusive towards others – the hard question about how we deal with religious pluralism. I know some may struggle with the church's history of oppression and repression. Still others may resist coming out and saying that we are followers of Jesus because we are afraid that people might think we are one of "those" Christians. I know these things mostly because I've been there myself. I too have taken a certain pride in my skepticism about organized religion, and Christianity in particular. We sometimes take pride in the fact that we resist making faith claims that are too bold. But one of the things that this passage tells us is that faith, from our standpoint at least, is less about intellect and reason and more about remaining open to a call and being ready to take big risks whenever that blank is filled in. Could it be that our skepticism is sometime a cover for our fears? Could it be that the real reason why we resist Jesus' call is because we are afraid of what we might lose, of the sacrifices we would have to make?

What would have happened if those four men had a taken a moment to think about and to 'process' their actions as we surely would? Rather, they threw caution to the wind and allowed themselves in an instant to be caught up in the presence of the most holy, divine and beautiful thing they had ever encountered. The simplicity of this passage untangles itself from all the intellectual nets in which we get ourselves caught up, and which leave us writhing and resisting any true leaps of faith.

Soren Kierkegaard said that “The truth is a snare: you cannot have it, without being caught. You cannot have the truth in such a way that you catch it, but only in such a way that it catches you.” I’m afraid that in all of our high-minded skepticism about religion, we maybe trying to catch God up and to catch Jesus up rather than letting God and Jesus catch us and speak to us that line that if we really listened, we couldn’t resist it if we tried.

During this upcoming Lent at First Church, we will be focusing on the spiritual practice of discernment. Ann Plumley has already begun this work with a few of you I know, but this passage comes to us all as a perfect primer. Monks and prophets know well that true discernment of the ways that God is calling each of us requires great patience, discipline, and prayer. Without Jesus standing before us, it may not always happen as immediately as it did for the first disciples. This Lent, we will be learning about these spiritual practices, methods of discerning call that have been developed by the great spiritual leaders of our faith to help us in this process. These are powerful practices that have the capacity to reshape our lives if we are bold enough to engage them, and to make room for their lives. What would it take for you to devote yourself in earnest to such practices this Lent? I ask you now so you have a few weeks still to get ready for it. What would it take for you to clear away time in your schedules, to open yourself to what you may hear, to listen for the call and to be ready to respond? And again I ask you, what is that deep truth in your life waiting to be touched, waiting to be hooked, that would make you get up and go right now, no questions asked, on a new journey with God to places unknown. Even now, God calls out from the shoreline, Come and follow me and I will *make you*, I will *love you*, I will *create you* like never before! Amen.