

Making It Real

Luke 5:1-11

Jeff Marian

Want your faith to get real? Here's one word to live into: "follow". It's a word we find in today's Scripture reading from Luke 5,

One day as Jesus was preaching on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, great crowds pressed in on him to listen to the word of God. He noticed two empty boats at the water's edge, for the fishermen had left them and were washing their nets. Stepping into one of the boats, Jesus asked Simon, its owner, to push it out into the water. So he sat in the boat and taught the crowds from there.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Now go out where it is deeper, and let down your nets to catch some fish."

"Master," Simon replied, "we worked hard all last night and didn't catch a thing. But if you say so, I'll let the nets down again." And this time their nets were so full of fish they began to tear! A shout for help brought their partners in the other boat, and soon both boats were filled with fish and on the verge of sinking.

When Simon Peter realized what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, "Oh, Lord, please leave me—I'm such a sinful man." For he was awestruck by the number of fish they had caught, as were the others with him. His partners, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were also amazed. Jesus replied to Simon, "Don't be afraid! From now on you'll be fishing for people!" And as soon as they landed, they left everything and followed Jesus.
This is the word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

Thirteen times in the Gospels Jesus calls people to follow Him. Now, those words had a very specific meaning in Jesus' day. It's what a Rabbi would say to an aspiring student, and it was an invitation to attach one's life, to conform one's life, to the life of the Rabbi. Any student who answered the call to "follow me" would literally spend their day following in the footsteps of their Rabbi, learning what the Rabbi knew and doing what the Rabbi did. If you wanted to pray a blessing over such a student you

would say, "May the dust of your Rabbi cover you." In other words, may you follow your Rabbi so closely that the dust he kicks up from his sandals will cover you.

And that is just what Peter, James and John did in today's Scripture reading. They responded to Jesus' call to follow, and for three years they walked where Jesus walked, they learned what Jesus knew, and they did what Jesus did. They sought to conform their lives to His.

Somehow, many of us in modern Christianity seem to have missed that essential calling, "Come, follow me." Perhaps it's our theology of grace that says that there is nothing we can do to earn God's love and favor, and so we do nothing. Or maybe it's because Confirmation feels like an educational endeavor that we graduate from, so faith is little more than having information between our ears. Still others were wrongly taught that Christianity is all about what happens after we die and has little to do with daily life here and now. It's no wonder that so many struggle to find much relevance in the Christian faith.

But when we commit ourselves to following Jesus, everything changes. Of course, we can't physically walk behind Jesus as those first disciples did. When I say "follow Jesus" I mean to live by the same values and patterns of behavior that He did. When we love the unlovable, embrace the outcast, work for peace and justice, bind up the wounds of the sick and brokenhearted, forgive those who have offended us, speak truth to power, wash the feet of those who don't deserve it – that's what it means to follow Jesus. It's a matter of daily conforming our lives to His.

And when we do that, two things happen. First, we come face to face with our sinful nature – our self-centeredness, our judgmental attitudes, our sense of entitlement. Tell me to forgive someone who's wounded me and my gut reaction is, "Not until they apologize." Invite me to serve someone I don't like and my immediate, internal reaction is, "No, they don't deserve it." That's my sinful nature, and when we're confronted with our sinful nature, it's humbling, just as it was for Peter in today's scripture reading.

And second, when we follow in the way of Jesus in daily life we'll realize the depth of our need for God.

We can play “church” on our own, but when we seek to actually follow Jesus in daily life we quickly come to the end of our own resources. Or, to use the language of today’s scripture reading we’ll find our nets empty. While we live in a culture that really dislikes dependence, living in dependence of God’s love, grace, forgiveness and power are at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. It’s why Jesus said, “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there’s more of God and God’s rule.”

That reality came home to me in my first two years here at Prince of Peace. I felt called here and believed that in moving to Minnesota I was following Jesus, but it didn’t take long for me to wonder if maybe I’d made a mistake. The staff was badly siloed. Many in the congregation had little trust in leadership. And then, of course, we discovered that we were five million dollars in debt. There were a lot of days I can recall driving into the parking lot, laying my head on the steering wheel and thinking to myself, “What am I doing here?” I knew that I was in over my head, and that I needed wisdom, power and strength beyond what I had. And so, I prayed every day, “God, this is your church. I can’t do this without you. Give me grace to do what is mine to do, and faith to entrust the rest to you.” When I look back on those days it is clear to me that as hard as those days were, my faith, my sense of dependence upon God, has rarely been more alive.

I believe that the Spirit of God is constantly calling us into a life of following Jesus. And if we will respond, not only will we find ourselves humbled and dependent; we’ll be called to leave many things behind. Peter, James and John left their families and their profession behind to follow Jesus. They left what they knew. They left what was familiar. They left what was comfortable. They left what gave them security. Why? I can only assume it’s because they sensed that in following Jesus there was more. More meaning. More purpose. More growth. More adventure. More aliveness.

Friends, when Jesus said that he came to bring us life and more life he wasn’t just talking about heaven after we die. He was talking about more life, more aliveness now. And we’ll experience that “moreness” of life, not by staying where it’s comfortable but by following Jesus into places where it isn’t – loving the unlovable, embracing the outcast, working for peace

and justice, binding up the wounds of the sick and brokenhearted, forgiving those who have offended us, speaking truth to power, washing the feet of those who don’t deserve it. That’s when our pulse quickens, our trust deepens and our faith becomes real.

Cyclists often do something called drafting. That’s when you ride directly behind another cyclist, which reduces your wind resistance. Drafting behind another cyclist actually reduces the effort to maintain speed by 30%. But there’s a cost to drafting. It takes a tremendous amount of trust in the rider ahead of you because your front tire is just inches away from their back tire. And if those tires touch, you’re both going down. And the pavement isn’t kind when you’re cruising along at over 20 miles per hour. No wise cyclist will draft behind a stranger. You only draft behind someone you really trust. Jesus is inviting you to draft behind Him today. Following in His way isn’t easy, but you can trust Him. And just as Jesus filled the empty nets of those first disciples, Jesus will provide what you need to accomplish all that He calls you to do. Want your faith to come alive? Want this thing called Christianity to have real relevance and meaning in daily life? Jesus is calling, “come follow me.” So, follow.

Let’s pray:

Lord Jesus, you call us to follow, not as a demand but as an invitation. You promise to lead us and provide for us, but we resist. Our pride, our fear, our unwillingness to be dependent hinder our willingness to follow you. We long for the abundant life that you promise, so please change our hearts. Change our minds. Lead us to long to live like you. It’s in your strong name that we pray. Amen.