

Let Go of the Boat

When I was a teenager, I was really active in my youth group. I liked learning and talking about life and faith and how God was present in my life and in the lives of those around me. And while I was in middle school and high school, I loved going to church and being part of a youth group where I felt that I belonged and could be myself – especially when I had not always felt that way at school.

I had always felt called into the ministry, I began to verbalize that at my youth group. Now, you need to know that in my youth group there was no strong teaching about the specific Bible stories, especially the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures. And I never took on the practice of memorizing scripture verses or reading books by popular Christian authors.

7 years later, I decided to go to college and answer the call into ministry ignoring the pastor of my youth who said women don't become pastors and moving forward to become an ordained pastor. But you can imagine what I felt like in my freshman year of college when the majority of my fellow students involved in campus ministry had grown up either home schooled or gone to Christian schools all their lives and were immersed in this Christian culture that was so foreign to me. They could recite long Bible passages from memory and speak with an extensive "Christianese" lingo that I had never even heard of. Such as when I asked them how they were they answered "I am blessed and highly favored." I had no idea how to respond to that.

I started to feel insecure and in addition to being told by many at the college and the professors that I couldn't be called into the ministry because I was a woman, I started to doubt that I could even be involved in ministry because of how I began to see myself as inadequate.

And so I convinced myself for several years that I was wrong about feeling called into ministry and that maybe I was actually suited to work in a different field, like teaching or something like that. And yet somehow, after all of that, Jesus did not stop calling me.

And his voice eventually got louder than the voices of my fellow Asbury students and the voices of my own insecurities. And the encouragement I received from my new pastor at home helped me to take the terrifying step out of my own comfort zone and move on from Asbury college to Asbury Seminary to pursue ordained ministry.

Minus the women issue, I can't help but wonder if this is close to how the fishermen from Galilee in our Gospel lesson for this morning were feeling when Jesus sought them out and called them to follow him.

You see, in first century Judaism – particularly in the region of Galilee – there was a very extensive process a man would have to go through in order to become a disciple – or a follower – of a rabbi. Boys in many parts of Palestine would have started studying with a community rabbi in most likely the local synagogue or meeting place at the young age of 4-5 years old in what was called beth ha sefer, the first level of public education.

During this time of study, young boys (and possibly in some places, young girls) would mostly study the Torah, the first five books of our current Bible today. By the time these boys and girls finished this level of education (which ended at around age 10), most of the children would have been expected to have memorized the entire Torah.

After children finished beth ha sefer, many of the boys – and most definitely the girls – would stay home and participate in home-keeping or would start learning either the family trade or another trade in the community. The top students coming out of this level of education would continue onto the next level, which was called beth ha Talmud.

Students in this level would start to learn different interpretations of the scriptures and oral traditions and they would continue to memorize more scripture.

Most children would finish this level by the time they were 14 or 15 years old – having memorized 39 books of the Bible. Can you imagine that? When I was in college, I could barely memorize one or two Bible verses before I got bored!

At this point in a youth's life, the majority of boys would go onto learning their family trade or another trade if they had not already started to do so.

Yet the top students among these already top students would go onto studying at the next level, which was called beth ha midrash, meaning "House of Study." These basically "Yale" students of the first century would seek out their top rabbi that they wanted to study under and ask him if they could "follow" him. The rabbi would then decide whether or not this young man was knowledgeable and adequate enough to trust him fully and to take on his "yoke" or his particular interpretation of scripture and then eventually pass that yoke onto others when they began their own teaching ministry at around the age of 30.

In many cases, the students would be turned down by the rabbis they sought out and they would then have to find another rabbi or find a whole different trade to go into.

Our passage in Matthew doesn't give us many details about the fishermen who encountered Jesus at the Sea of Galilee. We are not told how many years they had been fishing or how old they were. We only know for sure that at least James and John were fishing with their father, Zebedee, and therefore were continuing their family trade.

And because these two brothers and another set of brothers – Simon who we know as Peter and his brother Andrew, were all in the fishing trade, we also know that they would have only finished as far as the second level of education and may have only been through the first level of education.

And so these four fishermen in our scripture in Matthew had not made the cut. They were not the top of the top of the top of the students of their day. They did not have an extensive resume – scriptural knowledge, interpretations, or lingo- that would have enabled them to continue climbing the educational ladder.

They were definitely not fit to follow a rabbi – a Jewish teacher – become his disciple, take on his yoke, learn to imitate him and eventually be commissioned by him to share his scriptural interpretations as they would become teachers themselves...at least this is what the fishermen would have been told by the more advanced students, their families and their local rabbis. And I can't help but think that this is what these fishermen believed about themselves as well.

And yet, for some reason, Jesus thinks otherwise. For some reason, as Jesus begins his own ministry at a little over the age of 30, he seeks out these fishermen – these average “every day Joes” who Jesus just happens to pass as he is walking along the Sea of Galilee.

For some reason, Jesus sees in them a great potential – to become his disciples and eventually his friends – to learn to imitate him and to become participants in the ministry of bringing about the kingdom of heaven here on earth by bringing hope and light into a harsh world.

So Jesus calls out to them, “Follow me and you will no longer be in the trade of gathering up just fish, but you will be in the trade of gathering up God's people and bringing them good news.”

And we see that the fishermen immediately get up, drop everything they are doing and follow Jesus as he travels across Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and bringing healing to the sick and the suffering.

Now, I don't know about you, but whenever I read this scripture, it amazes me that these fishermen just get up, leave all that they know behind them and immediately respond to Jesus call to follow him. If it were me, I'm pretty sure I would have done the same thing I did for the many years I doubted my own adequacy during and after college. I would have stayed in that boat...and I would have grabbed and held on as tight as I could to that fishing net and to the side of that boat – to what was comfortable and familiar to me – so as not to go against the expectations that others had of me and that I had of myself – and so I could avoid confronting my own fears and insecurities.

I can't help but wonder how often that happens to so many others of us in the church as well.

I wonder how often we let others' discouraging voices and expectations of us – or even our own insecurities – hold us back from responding to Jesus' call to follow him and to spread his good news to those living in the hard things the world throws at us.

I wonder how often we let our own fears about our lack of church background and religious lingo, biblical education or faith formation keep us from teaching or even joining a Sunday school class or small group study, leading a prayer or reading scripture during worship on a Sunday morning or even chatting with our fellow Centralites after worship at coffee hour.

I wonder how often we let the negative voices we hear throughout our society and even within our own selves about what makes a person's voice worthy of being heard and of bearing good news,; like how a person looks or the kind of education or type of job, home, possessions they have or who they love dominate the way we view ourselves. And how often do we let these messages hold us back from getting involved in community organizations and our neighborhood schools and committees?

And I wonder how often we allow our own fears of what others will say and think about us if we do follow Jesus' call to then hold us back from speaking up about and getting involved in advocacy for justice so that all people are cared for and treated equally.

I can tell you from a lot of personal experience, it is definitely not easy to immediately drop these negative voices, fears and insecurities off at the edge of the boat, along with all that is familiar and comfortable to us – and then to step out of that boat and confidently follow Jesus in his ministry of light shining, good news spreading, and kingdom bringing.

And yet, at times we wish to hold on tight to our fishing nets and to the sides of our boat. It doesn't help to be reminded of the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in a sermon he preached in 1963 as he prepared for the Birmingham campaign. I have updated it to make it more inclusive.

“The ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort and convenience but where they stand in times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk their position, their prestige and even their life for the welfare of others.”

This may seem like a very difficult call – to get up out of the comfort and convenience of our boats, to lift up our shaky voices and join this terrifying movement of following Jesus. And yet, the good news is that Jesus does not call us to follow him by ourselves. He calls us in community to follow him in shining light in the darkness and lifting up our voices together to spread the good news of the kingdom of God.

So when we hear Jesus' call and we just feel like we cannot let go of that fishing net and the side of that boat, our brothers and sisters can come sit with us inside our boat and help us to take that step in dropping the net, getting out of the boat and leaving that behind.

And when we are afraid to open our mouths because we just don't know how to spread the good news, our brothers and sisters can stand alongside of us and help us to find the words to say.

And when we feel it is difficult to let our lights shine because of the darkness we – ourselves – are living in, our brothers and sisters can shine their own lights in front of us to help us see and find our way.

Because when Jesus calls us to follow him, just as he saw the potential of those four every day Joe fishermen that he called on the Sea of Galilee over 2,000 years ago and believed in them, so does he see and believe in each one of us – no matter what other voices might be saying, including our own.

We can have confidence in knowing that we will eventually be able to find our way to the path that Jesus is walking on. AS we hear Jesus calling to us: “Follow me” let us confidently lift up our voices together saying Here I Am. Teach me your way. And I will follow you

A lot of times we believe that God's call is reserved for a select few, you know, those of us pastor types. Maybe we allow ourselves to believe that they are for non-clergy, but even then, only a select few. However, in Matthew's gospel that idea is challenged by

the face that these first disciples were fishermen. They were ordinary, everyday people, going about their very ordinary, everyday lives. They were people who worked with their hands, who likely lived day to day, hoping they would catch enough fish to survive. Their hands and faces were weathered by wind and sea. They probably said things they shouldn't. And yet, this is Jesus' target audience. Just like the shepherds on the hillsides heard the news of his birth, God again brings in unlikely people into the extraordinary story. Maybe we should take note. Maybe, God will even call us into the story – if we are open enough to hearing Jesus' voice saying "Follow me."

Follow me – on a cold morning in January, when the warmth of a cozy bed is even more alluring on a Sunday morning, into a time of worship, prayer and study with a community of faith.

Follow me – when you see that co-worker, classmate, or neighbor who seems to not have anyone to talk to, who is longing for someone to hear his or her or their story and offer support.

Follow me – at a dinner party where jokes become increasingly crude and you can't quite bring yourself to laugh at yet another joke that brims with racism or sexism. Follow me – to speak out for what is right.

Follow me – when you see those who are hungry or without shelter, or who lack decent clothing, or who are oppressed and without voice; recognize them as fellow children of God and respond in action – from making sandwiches and serving lunch at NOAH to organizing clothing in our free store to working for real changes in the systems that have failed.

Follow me. God's calls are all around us. James Chatham says this: If the Bible says anything clearly, it says this: God calls us. Calls us to do whatever God has in mind. Calls us to set a great many other things aside and follow God's bidding.

It can be difficult to hear God's call. There are many other places in our lives and world that make a lot of noise, too, in hopes that we will follow.

Follow me – you need this list of products in order to make yourself look or feel your very best. With the right combination of them, you will be successful.

Follow me – on social media, so you can keep up with the latest news and thoughts of celebrities, politicians and friends.

Follow me – just make up some plausible excuse, even if it isn't quite true, to spare your friend's feelings and avoid an invitation. It's just a little white lie, after all.

Our work, it seems, is to discern which of these “follow me's” are from God and which might be from places that don't quite lead us down the same path of discipleship. To do this, we have to be open to the kind of change god's call might bring to us.

Its really a process of discernment, and it helps us discover our vocation, that call that God issues to each of us as disciples. It's a unique call, based on the skills and gifts and passions we have, balanced with the needs of the world.

Frederick Buechner is often quoted for his definition of vocation as “the place when your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” But he goes on to further explain it in this way saying: By and large a good rule for finding out is this: The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a) but if your work is writing cigarette ads, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b) but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the changes are you have not only bypassed (a), but you're probably aren't helping your patients much either.

The disciples were fishermen, but when they received the call, the enthusiastically followed. And Jesus gave them a new vocation – to fish for people. He took the skills they presumably already had – fishing – and used their abilities to help them learn how to be disciples. I believe God's call works in many of the same ways today. God nurtures in us the talents, gifts and interests that we have and helps us find ways to use them to be a part of what God is doing in the world.

In the movie *Dead Poet's Society*, a boy's boarding school experiences the creative and dynamic teaching of a somewhat renegade English teacher, Professor Keating, portrayed by the amazing Robin Williams. In one of the early scenes of the movie, he provides commentary on how to approach reading poetry that I believe is very much akin to how we should approach discerning our calls.

After opening a poetry text book, he asks a student to begin reading the introduction, “Understanding Poetry.” the students find a boring rubric for interpreting the merit of a given poem – paying attention to rhyme, figures of speech, etc.

Professor Keating toys with it for a moment, illustrating the line graph quantitative analysis of different poems. And then he calls the whole introduction “excrement.” There’s something more to it, he says, than being able to graph a poem’s perfection and merit. It’s not about following a prescribed checklist of things. Instead, Professor Keating instructs them to pit out that page – and then rip out the entire introduction. He gathers the boys in close then urges them to approach poetry in this way saying:

We don’t read and write poetry because its cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race and the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business and engineering – these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life – but poetry, beauty romance, love – these are what we stay alive for. To quote from Whitman, “O me! O life!...of the questions of these recurring, of the endless strains of the faithless – of cities filled with the foolish...What good amid these, O me? O Life?

Answer, that you are there – that life exists and identity, that the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse. That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?

What will our verse be? That is the question of call, and how we will be a part of what God is doing the world. Discerning. It is less like reading an instruction manual and more like reading poetry. It requires interpretive work. Not just what the author, God is saying, but what we are saying in response. It is a two way street between us and God. It begins with God coming to us, in the midst of our everyday, ordinary lives and saying, “Follow me.”

The verses that follow? They are up to us. But first we have to let go of the boat. Amen.