

The Push and Pull of Calling

Sunday, January 22, 2023
Third Sunday after Epiphany
The Rev. Hannah Lundberg

Psalm 27:1, 4-9
Matthew 4:12-23

Call narratives can be particularly vexing for me. As someone who struggles with decision-making, tumbling around pro and con lists, asking for insight and perspectives from anyone who will give it, editing emails for an embarrassing amount of time, second-guessing choices again and again—quick and definitive decisions often elude me. A few weeks ago, I was having lunch with a few of our college students, both in their senior years, and talking about how overwhelming it can be to discern what the right next steps are in their lives. Megan and I joined them in that same space, moving toward the end of our time as resident ministers and trying to discern how God might be calling us into the future. The four of us agreed that it is easy to trust that somewhere down the road our paths might make more sense, but for now it can be frightening to figure out what the right next choice is. Are we listening to God’s call, or are we just doing what sounds like a good idea to us? Discernment can be a slippery slope of self-doubt.

It’s why I’m so impressed by Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John, who not only set aside their established careers as fishermen to follow Jesus, but do it at the drop of a hat. *Immediately* they leave their nets. *Immediately*, James and John walk away from their father and their boat, and follow Jesus. Is the draw of Christ that strong, or are they all just much braver than I?

Remember, it’s not a neutral moment, either. Just before this passage, Jesus is tested in the wilderness, facing hunger and temptation in visceral ways. At the start of our reading this morning, Jesus receives word that John the Baptist has been arrested, and his decision to “withdraw to Galilee” is a careful choice in response to the threat of the Roman empire all around him. Jesus needs to lay low, he’s not the safest person to be associated with, and yet Peter, Andrew, James, and John *immediately* leave behind their harbors of safety and apolitical security when Jesus calls upon them.

Still, perhaps it is not merely bravery that brings these four to boldly follow Jesus. In my experience, the call of Christ often involves both an external pull and an internal push. Jesus declares that the kingdom of heaven has come near—a kingdom unlike the domineering Roman empire with which these men would be acquainted, but a kingdom of peace and love, of gentleness and reconciliation. A kingdom that prioritizes the poor and the defeated, not the wealthy and well-planned. The fisherman are not high on the social ladder as it is, and perhaps their deep longing for a world turned upside down makes it easier for them to walk away from their nets. What tugs on their heartstrings? Hope for a world of dignity and care? Imaginative possibilities of a different world order, where militarized empire does not hold all the power?

Biblical Scholar K.C. Hanson¹ describes some elements of the fishing industry around the Sea of Galilee with insight on the context these four disciples might have experienced. He explains how at this time the fishing industry was shifting more and more into an empire-wide economy, with more fish being preserved and shipped to distant markets, putting up more opportunities for the Roman empire to levy taxes, leasing fees, and other costs on small-scale fishing families. The biblical text doesn't give us all the context of economic pressure that Jesus's friends may have been under, but it is not a difficult stretch to imagine they feel increasing pressure to survive under the economic realities of the Roman empire. When Jesus turns up and invites them to a new world order, the internal push may be just as strong as the external pull. What possibilities could exist for a world that looks entirely different for these lowly fishers?

In our world today, I often ponder what social conditions might make me more or less responsive to the liberating hope of the kingdom of God. When Jesus offers a world turned upside down, where the poor are given dignity, prisoners are set free, and no one is tossed aside—how much does that liberate me, and how much does it threaten me? Cause if I'm entirely honest, there are many things about the current world order—the systems of power, control, and privilege, that put me and many of us in a comfortable position.

From an outpost of privilege, are we willing to set aside our metaphorical nets to seek the call of Jesus? What if it means giving up our security? The legal and cultural protections of whiteness? Our predictability? Our likeability in certain crowds? I often wonder if I have grown so close to the powers and comfort of empire and it is harder to give certain things up in pursuit of the kingdom of God. I'm a white woman in a world where law enforcement will likely believe me over others in a conflict. I'm someone with a master's degree in a world where that gives me credibility and legitimacy. You don't need to hear my whole litany of privilege right now, but as we admire the response of the fishermen, I wonder if we can feel the call of God that requires us to step outside our comfort zones. To go where we might get some things wrong in the process of trying to do right. How do we heed that call, even if it risks our comfortable privilege?

When I get in that place, doubting the ways that my proximity to power clouds how I hear God's call, I find hope in looking at all the life-giving ways that the kingdom of God gives me hope. For me, and for you, what are the things that glimmer with joyful possibility when Jesus extends a hand and says "follow me." What are the things that give that internal push just as much as the external pull? As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I felt that glimmer the first time I fully understood that God could and would love me exactly as I am, in relationships that are joyful and right for me. As a perfectionist, I felt that glimmer when my college chaplain helped me fully understand that I didn't need to do or say anything special to be deserving of God's care. I've felt that glimmer in intergenerational relationships at church, loving and being loved by people I might have little in common with generationally, but where a love of God has brought us together. I feel that glimmer on mornings like today, when news of another mass shooting comes out, and all my rationality sends me to despair, but hope in God will journey with us through the grief and fear. Economic interests may have made it easier for the fishermen to say yes to Jesus's call, but the goodness of the kingdom of God is that each of us finds hope and liberation in the freedom of God's call, in whatever social position we find ourselves in. We need the liberation of that hopeful instruction, "follow me."

After the sermon we'll sing one of my favorite hymns, "Will you Come and Follow Me," which really does the heavy lifting about how we eagerly respond to the call of God. It engages these big

¹ Hanson, K. C., & Oakman, D. E. (2009). *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*. Fortress Press.

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questions of justice and reconciliation, but to me, the most powerful words are in the fourth verse: “Will you love the you you hide if I but call your name? Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?”

Many times, I don’t know how to relinquish control. And I am afraid of many things. But like the fishermen along the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus says “follow me,” I yearn to say yes. When Jesus says “follow me,” my yes is not necessarily about being the most morally upstanding person, the best seeker of justice or advocate for the downtrodden. Those things come with it, but primarily it’s a selfish yes. It’s a yes that knows that in saying yes, in seeking God, I am liberated into a kingdom of hope and possibility. I am called into community that says “you are enough.” I am given a door to being fully myself and fully beloved.

Back at the table at Chipotle with those college students, it was hard to give a definitive answer about how to know how God is calling us. Discernment is complicated and multi-faceted. Parsing out the voice of God from the voices that tell us all the things we should be or do can be an overwhelming prospect. We do our best to track out which callings fit with our ethical perspective on care for one another, for the earth, and for those with less power. Which callings match with what we know of God’s care for justice, kindness, and humility. Which callings feel right, but not merely because they feel comfortable. It’s best when we do it in community. I’m grateful for the way we often approach discernment in the Presbyterian church, relying on the insights and perspectives of one another as we discern everything from a call to ministry to the development of a budget. Sometimes it’s inefficient, but it’s always thoughtful. You’ve seen it in the ordination and installation of our newest class of deacons and elders over the last two weeks, who didn’t just think to themselves “I would make a pretty great deacon!” but who others identified as those with important gifts and perspectives.

We don’t always do it perfectly, but in listening for the voice of God together we hear important perspectives. Ideally, we engage voice of the poor fisherman even if we are in a position to benefit from status quo fishing practices in the Roman Empire. Together, we open ourselves to the full spectrum of liberation in the kingdom of God. It makes room for lifting up leaders who might not see their own strengths, for speaking up on behalf of folks who have been silenced in the past, for a community to name and know the value of its members, and for us to boldly move in directions that might seem frightening or uncertain.

Jesus says “follow me,” and we try to listen. In that call we seek the kingdom of God, one that might not always be comfortable, but will certainly be good.