

## **“A Calling to Deep Gladness”**

**Mark 1: 16-20**

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany—January 22, 2012

Carbondale CUMC

### **I. Story of Preschool**

Every morning my son’s preschool class begins their day with a nature walk on campus, rain, shine, or snow. The intention with the walk is to get out excess energy, of course, but also to introduce the preschoolers to the daily rhythms and study of creation around them. The teachers give them space to explore a stump, or a piece of bark, or a leaf. Then, when the time comes to move the parade of snowsuited little ones along, the lead teacher begins singing a song. “Come follow follow follow follow, come follow follow follow me.” Bark slips from hands. Jumps over logs almost suspend in midair. Swings from tree limbs halt. Immediately, the three and four year olds in her charge toddle after her, with steps made short by all the puffy winter layers they’re wearing. We parents watch this process in amazement. We wonder what sort of magic she has to make twelve spirited young children drop whatever they are doing, and follow. Sometimes we wish we had such extraordinary powers in our own home. Most of the time, though, we are grateful our children have such a gentle, loving, and very gifted teacher to follow.

### **II. Jesus and the Disciples**

In our story today, a very gifted teacher steps out into creation, onto a lakeshore, and says “Come follow follow follow follow, come follow follow follow me. And I will make you fish for people.” The cast of a fishing net almost suspends in midair. Immediately Simon Peter and Andrew slog through the shallow lakewater to shore, and toddle after Jesus on legs tired from a long night of fishing. We might wonder what kind of magnetic, almost magical pull Jesus has--to make established, educated men drop everything to follow him. It’s quite

extraordinary for men in traditional Israelite society to leave their families. Peter was married with his mother-in-law in household, James and John leave their father in the boat. Such abrupt departures put their clan at economic risk. These weren't two teenagers out sporting around to catch fish; fishing was their livelihood. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were prosperous; they had servants, houses, and families. It would have been very hard for these fishermen to drop all of their entanglements, to drop the very nets from which they made their living. The call of Jesus to them must have been absolutely compelling.

The Greek word used in the verse 20—"Immediately Jesus called them" is *kalew*. It means to call or summon in the literal sense, as in, "Honey, come here. I'm done with changing diapers of the day. Your turn!"—that kind of call. *Kalew* also retains a deeper meaning though, in Greek. It can mean the giving of an attribution to someone, also translated to mean "giving a name." What Jesus did to those fishermen by calling them to follow him was to give them a new name—disciple. This calling, this naming, changed the trajectory of the rest of their lives. Peter, Andrew, James, and John stepped into a new life story when they decided to follow Jesus. Jesus named them, and they couldn't resist the loving power behind such an adoption. With mud gushing between their toes, they followed him.

## **I. Our Following the Call**

How then, do we follow Christ? How do we follow in the footsteps of the disciples—who had as much or more than we have to lose by dropping their nets? Our own nets of obligations, commitments, and just plain stuff entangle us; we drag our feet in following because we think we might need some of that old baggage on our new journey with Jesus.<sup>1</sup> My family and I recently moved. I can tell you I have an enormous amount of stuff—

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia D. Weems, "Reflections on the Lectionary" *Christian Century* January 11, 2011, 21.

especially books, along with dishes, furniture, bicycles, and skis. I'm not ready now to walk barefoot through the mud leaving everything behind. Kudos to the disciples, but I'm not there yet. Would anyone else here have trouble leaving house, family, work—all your stuff behind? So, how do we faithfully follow, follow Christ? How do we live into his call, his naming of us?

Our founder of Methodism, John Wesley teaches that the call to follow Jesus can happen in a moment on a lakeshore, but more likely is to be the work of a lifetime. A distinctive mark of our Wesleyan heritage is the understanding of life as a spiritual pilgrimage deep into the heart of God.<sup>2</sup> For Wesley, the life of faith consisted both of significant “lakeshore moments” in which we offer our lives to Christ—moments of justification—AND daily ongoing times of commitment—moments of sanctification. Wesley understood his following of Christ best as a journey of a lifetime that he committed to walk daily. Wesley wrote in one of his letters on the *kalen*, the calling of Christ on our lives. He stated “the hope of our calling [is] to know that our hope is sincerity, not perfection; not to do well, but to do our best.”<sup>3</sup>

Wesley's understanding of what it means to follow Christ's call upon our lives certainly helps me in my own attempts to pluck my feet out of the mud. As a Methodist, I've come to understand Jesus's calling to me, his naming of me as “disciple” as a journey of steps toward God—with several changes in direction. As a child, when asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would reply, “a librarian.” I loved being around books, reading books, immersing myself in story. By high school and college, I realized that by being a professor of English and literature I would get paid to read and discuss books, so this

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 321.

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, *Letters*, 25: 318.

became my next sense of calling. All the while, I was deeply engaged in service to others—an engagement modeled to me by my parents. I visited nursing homes, led the service club in my high school, and developed a program for homeless children while in college. I received great joy both from serving and from learning. When deciding what to do after college, amidst pressures from professors to attend law school or grad school, I had a “lakeshore” moment while on a foreign study in Eastern Europe. Outside of a Russian orthodox monastery in Suzdal, Russia, with the sound of nuns chanting in the air, I had a clear sense of God directing me to “go and serve.” So after a couple of months of research, I decided to go teach at a small collegio in Honduras as a United Methodist Volunteer in Mission (UMVIM). I dropped all my nets, and I followed (easier when you are 22). During that arduous year of teaching kids who didn’t want to learn, I discerned that I enjoyed most talking with them not about English nouns and verbs, but about God. As a part of that long discernment journey I applied to schools of theology, and settled upon Duke—and another journey of steps began. At Duke I learned a deep and abiding love of the church, and in student field education settings and through classes I decided to pursue ordination in the United Methodist Church. I could now see in God’s *kalev*, God’s calling on me my love of learning and service coming together. My strongest “lakeshore moment” in seminary was my time of ministry with St. Mark United Methodist Church in Atlanta; that church surrounded me with love and affirmed in me gifts of ministry. Upon graduation my then fiancée, John, and I moved to Arizona, where he started medical studies, and I began serving Dayspring United Methodist. I felt deep gladness in pastoring that church, but also felt a nudging to do more study and learning (the desire to be back in libraries kept on). An experience of chronic illness ignited a desire to learn more about Christian wisdom on illness, healing, health, and suffering. So, my steps, and sense of God’s calling, steered me back to doctoral

study at Duke and an amazing time of deep learning. All the while, though, I missed being in ministry. Now, I rejoice in my calling to be here at Carbondale, to live into a gladness in service, as well as to cultivate a life of writing. My life of Jesus's calling to follow continues. As Wesley understood calling, the attempt to "drop the nets" is both lifelong, and a daily commitment to do our best—such a following of the call ultimately brings great gladness.

Last week, I encouraged us to reflect and pray upon what our gift is as a church, and what gifts you can personally bring to this community. Responding to Jesus' call to follow represents just another way of thinking about how we offer our gifts. This response to follow certainly doesn't mean you have to become a pastor, or have a direct vocational change. You can follow Christ in whatever job you might have by how you serve others. Many of you are retired, and might feel that you are done with vocational changes in life. Or perhaps you've been serving on a committee at the church here for the past eon—and now because we are better organized and rotating leadership—you are free to think about where God may be calling you now. You see (come and see from last week) Jesus's call to follow is ongoing, daily no matter how old we are or what stage of life we might be in or what occupation we currently hold. So how then do you follow Christ? How do you know how God is calling you, how God is naming you to be a disciple? How do you, when do you, know that it's time to step out of the mud, and follow Jesus?

The well-known pastor and episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, writes of a time in her life when she was struggling mightily with how Christ might be calling her. She simply didn't know what she was to do and be. So one midnight, in great frustration and exasperation she fell to her knees in prayer and said, "Okay, God. You need to level with me. What do you want me to be? What do you want me to do? What are you calling me to do." She says that she felt a powerful sense of God saying "Do what pleases you. Belong to

me, but do what pleases you.” She says it struck her as very strange that God’s call could actually touch a place of greatest joy within her, that she could be called to do the thing that pleases her the most. Following God’s call means doing that which brings us the greatest gladness. Joy is the biggest measure of how we discern our calling, of how we are to use our gifts.<sup>4</sup> As Wesley understood it, our calling is the journey of our lifetime, made up of daily commitments to do our best with joy.

Another Christian writer, Frederick Buechner says, “Our calling is where our deepest gladness and the world’s hunger meet.” Think about that. “Our calling is where our deepest gladness and the world’s hunger meet.” Jesus’s call to you on the lakeshore is ultimately about bringing you into joy as you serve this church, this community, this world. Perhaps deep gladness is what made Peter, Andrew, James, and John drop their nets. Perhaps deep gladness is what could make you drop nets, too. Pull your feet out of that mud. Step into what makes you glad. Come follow, follow, follow, follow, Come follow, follow, follow Christ. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Rev. Dr. Thomas Long, “Where You Never Expected to Be” 30 minutes.org aired on Oct. 22, 2006. Accessed on January 17, 2012.