

HEARING THE CALL AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME
Matthew 4: 12-23
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.

Many of us have heard this text read more times than we can count. We have responded to that call, and that is the reason we are here. But over the years we have heard other calls...like the call to be successful...like the call to reach for that perfect job or that enticing promotion or that secure tenure or that longed-for election to public office. The call of Christ to follow him can easily be drowned out by other calls.

I

It is striking that in Matthew's version of the call of the disciples, Jesus did not require any prerequisites. Peter and Andrew did not have to fill out an application, present a resume, or provide any letters of reference. He did not require doctrinal conformity, any particular kind of baptism, or any dress code. His only requirement seems to be a willingness to follow wherever Christ leads.

Furthermore, they were just doing their jobs, and their jobs were valuable. They were honest and hardworking people doing honest and

honorable work. But Christ's call to them disrupted something good for something better.

There is more: his call came at his initiative. There are a lot of stories from all the great religions about teachers who attract disciples. But have you noticed that in most of those traditions the disciples seek out the teacher, and sometimes they have to beg the teacher to allow them to be a student? In most traditions, the initiative is all with the student. But in this story Christ takes the initiative. He goes to Peter and Andrew, James and John, and he calls them from their good work to follow him.

He started with two, then two more, and then eventually twelve, and then those twelve multiplied over the centuries until finally here we are—students of Christ who have heard the same call to follow him. But we are in the first month of the year 2011, and we worship on the corner of Park and Salisbury in Worcester, MA, USA, North America, planet Earth. We are part of that long procession of people who have heard the call to follow Christ.

II

As followers of Christ, there are certain things to which we as a church have committed. We believe in inclusion: we welcome all in Christ's love. We believe in freedom of faith: the freedom to interpret God's Word in community and express our interpretation. We believe in service in the name

of Christ. We believe in spiritual growth, and it comes in both deliberate programs and just by living consciously aware of God's presence.

These values place us squarely in the Free Church Tradition from which Baptists and Congregationalists and others sprang in the 17th century. We are a diverse and multi-talented, multi-opinionated, and sometimes raucous bunch of Christians, but somehow in the name of Christ we reach out into Worcester and into the world in remarkable and authentic ways.

And we have committed ourselves to following Christ through our normal, everyday lives. Jesus did not call Peter and Andrew, James and John, to do something they did not already know how to do! Their calling was an extension of what they were already doing. He called them to fish, but their fishing would take on greater significance. We believe that we are called to be authentically who we are.

You may be a number cruncher. We believe that crunching numbers is not something you do separate from following Christ; rather, authentic and honest number crunching is part of Christ's calling for you. The same is true for whatever you do during the week. It takes great faith to do what you do with faithfulness and skill, and consider that in itself an act of following Christ.

There's more: we have committed to welcome diversity. We are serious about this. Many church growth experts say that diversity of belief

and race and culture and social views makes it difficult to grow. Challenging it may be, but we believe the opposite: Christ calls everyone!

Look at what Jesus did when he became an adult. Instead of living in Nazareth, his childhood home, he moved to Capernaum, one of the most culturally and racially diverse places in his world! It was at the intersection of the major trading routes of the east and west, north and south. It was not like Jerusalem, which was the buckle of the “Torah belt.” Capernaum was in Galilee, a region that had earned the nickname “Galilee of the Gentiles”—not a very complimentary nickname from the orthodox Jewish viewpoint.

But Jesus deliberately chose this multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-religious place as his home base. And he called his congregation with only two words: *Follow me*. He added no other qualifiers, such as “Follow me as long as your skin color matches mine!” He did not say, “Follow me if your income is in a certain range.” He added NO qualifiers!

And we don’t either! Spread the news! You can be a part of this community of disciples simply by doing what these fishermen did: *Immediately*, the text says, ...*they followed him*. There would be times when they would be skeptical about where he was leading them. When Jesus led them toward Jerusalem, Peter argued with him! There is no guarantee where

Christ will lead you, and there is no guarantee of perfect safety. But I can promise you this:

If you follow Christ in the context of this group of disciples known as the First Baptist Church of Worcester, you will find a diverse group of folk who will support you with prayer, who will care for you in more ways than you can count, and who will be your traveling companions along the sometimes slippery way of life. They will lift you up when you fall, encourage you when you are afraid, and cheer you on when you are successful. They will know you because they, too, have heard the call, and decided to follow Christ into the future. That is what Christian faith is all about: following Christ in our own everyday world.

There is one more thing to which we have committed ourselves: we have committed ourselves to gather on Sundays to recharge our spiritual batteries. This time at 10:00 AM on Sundays is not a time for entertainment. We come here because following Christ during the week is not always easy. It is frequently hard and exhausting. Some come exhilarated and want to celebrate. Some of us come with hearts breaking and head spinning. Some of us come with wounds that need healing. Some come to experience the power of the music or corporate prayer. We come because we need God and we need each other.

Worship, in other words, is not showmanship, but an opening of ourselves to the healing and empowering spirit of God. And it is opening our ears to hear that call once again, as if for the first time.

III

In a moment we are going to sing a song that is familiar to most of us: *I Have Decided to Follow Jesus*. But before we sing it, I want to tell you a story about that song. In northeastern India a boy named Sadhu Sundar Singh was born to a well-to-do Indian family in 1889. So that he could learn English, his parents sent him to a Christian High School. When he was fourteen years old, his mother died suddenly, and Sadhu was plunged into despair.

He asked the great “Why?” question. He was so angry, that in defiance of Christianity, he took a Bible and burned it page by page. Three days later he determined to commit suicide by sitting on a railway track. While waiting for the train, he had a vision of Christ, who beckoned to him: *Follow me*, said Jesus. He decided to follow Jesus.

When Sadhu told his father of his decision to follow Christ, his father was furious and demanded that he give up this absurd conversion. When Sadhu refused, his father denounced him and expelled him from his family. Sadhu spent the rest of his life bearing witness to the gospel of Christ, not only in his native India, but also in travels to Afghanistan and several trips to Tibet.

His witness in following Christ led others to do the same, eventually including his own father.

Fast forward to this century. Our own Ken Swenson made a trip to Tibet, where he found a strong Christian community, carrying on the faith of Sadhu Singh. And just last week our own Michael Harvey returned from a trip to Northern India, the land where Sadhu Singh lived. Michael taught in a Baptist seminary there, and he also preached two weeks ago today to a congregation of 6,000 Christians.

The song that Sadhu Singh sang so frequently has spread throughout the world. It is quite simple, yet profound. Our hymnbook has four verses, but the original lyrics had five verses. The one left out of our hymnbook goes like this:

*Though I may wander, I still will follow;
Though I may wander, I still will follow;
Though I may wander, I still will follow;
No turning back, no turning back.*

Wherever you may have wandered in this complex world, Christ invites you back today. *Follow me*, he says. No turning, no turning back.