

“A Radical Calling”
Matthew 4:12–23
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I had an interesting conversation many years ago late at night in Louisville, Kentucky at a fast-food establishment called White Castle. Some of you may know what I am talking about. They make the tiny little square hamburgers with American cheese and grilled onions. You need about ten of them to make a meal, at least I did back then. They are mostly for teenagers and adults with the late-night munchies, if you know what I mean.

On this occasion, I was getting food with the youth I worked with as we were headed to a lock-in when I ran into an old friend who had the munchies. I had known Ted in High School, and we had seen each other some in college, but it had been a long time since we had talked. When I started seminary, he started med school, both of us in Louisville, and we happened to meet this night over some glorious sliders.

After a little small talk, he apparently felt a need to tell me why he stopped coming to our campus church at UK. He said, “You guys were just too intense, almost cultlike. It was too much for me.” I thanked him for telling me and felt like pushing back on what he said, but he wasn’t in any shape to have a deep exchange. So, I let it go.

Cults are dangerous things. They prey on vulnerable and naïve people. They demand radical change and commitment. Participants often give up many freedoms, including freedom of thought, and this is dangerous! I have known and worked with people struggling with the after-effects of having been in a cult years later. They are toxic.

The thing is our campus church, the Christian Student Fellowship, wasn’t a cult. No demands were made, no freedoms were given up, most of us just happened to take Christian discipleship a bit more seriously than my friend. We got together often and did things together socially. We had Bible studies and worship, produced plays like “Godspell” and “You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown,” and we had an

array of social ministries students could participate in — I had a little brother though Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America. It was church.

CSF didn't do anything cultlike, but it may seem like Jesus does. Consider our reading from Matthew 4. When he hears that John the Baptist has been arrested, Jesus leaves Nazareth and goes to Capernaum in Galilee. John's arrest is ominous, foreshadowing Jesus' fate, though Capernaum is a lovely town with a beautiful view of Lake Galilee.

Jesus begins to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He walks along the shore of the lake, sees Simon and Andrew performing their work as fishermen, and says, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." They immediately leave their work and follow him. Jesus then sees James and John, issues them the same invitation, and they follow him. It happens so quickly, the invitation is cryptic, and the fishermen's response seems impulsive.

But this is just a summary of their calling. We don't know whether these men have met Jesus before or if there is more conversation than Matthew records. In fact, the text we considered two weeks ago from John 1 says Andrew meets Jesus first, spends time with him, decides to follow him, and then recruits his brother Simon. So, the idea that there could be more than Matthew records is not just a scholarly guess.

Yet, even amidst the minimal details we have, Jesus does not demand that the fishermen follow him, he does not coerce them or make any threats, nor are they particularly vulnerable or naïve. These are businessmen, not beggars, probably quite successful, with deep roots and lots of family in the area. Jesus simply says, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people," and they decide to join him. There must be something about him, his message, his calling, that appeals to them.

In a commentary on our text, Christian Education professor Rodger Nishioka tells a story from his childhood (*Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 1, p. 285–286). Growing up, there was a family rule that prohibited watching television while eating dinner. The one exception was that his father, who was a Presbyterian pastor, insisted on watching Mutual of Omaha's "Wild Kingdom" every Sunday night. Some of us remember doing that. I certainly do. It was a wonderful show.

One episode Nishioka remembers was about the elephant seals of Argentina, the same seals who experienced a devastating virus a few years ago. The story followed a mother and newborn seal pup. The mother had to leave the pup to seek nourishment in the sea. When she returned to the shore, she was separated from the pup, as were many mothers from their pups, but all was not lost.

The mother called for her pup and listened for a response. With each listening for a voice and following a scent, mother and pup soon found each other. The narrator explained that from birth the sound and scent of the pup are imprinted on the mother's memory, and the sound and scent of the mother are imprinted on the pup's memory. At this point, Nishioka's father said, "You know, that's how it is with God. We are imprinted with a memory of God, and God is imprinted with a memory of us, and even if it takes a lifetime, we will find each other."

It sounds like something a minister dad would say, but it is a helpful insight. There is something about God that seems familiar to us. We come from God and return to God. As Augustine said, our souls are restless until we rest in God. Perhaps there is something familiar about Jesus to the fishermen by the sea, something about his voice or teaching or character that resonates with them deep down, even if they have not met him before. Perhaps, but whatever the draw is, Jesus does not demand or coerce. He invites, and they accept the invitation.

And yet, while there is nothing cultlike about Jesus, his calling is radical. I know some people don't like the word. In my previous setting, there was pushback on the language in one of our proposed values. It referred to God's "radical" forgiveness. When a friend in the church objected to the term, I asked him to define it. He referenced protests of the 1960s, which he viewed in a negative light, but I noted that the dictionary definition of "radical" is something basic or fundamental or something extreme or outrageous. "Would this not describe God's forgiveness of us?" I asked. He agreed.

"Radical" is a word that describes God's forgiveness and Jesus' calling. He doesn't call disciples just to believe certain things or think in a specific way; he calls them live an entirely different life, to follow him;

and in our text, four fishermen do exactly that. They leave everything — work, family, and home — to go wherever Jesus goes, without having any details of what this will involve, other than being “fishers of people,” whatever that means. That is radical, and that is our calling.

It begins with leaving things behind, and not just bad things. The fishermen’s work is not bad nor are their families or community. They just can’t follow Jesus without leaving these things and people. We have a hard time imagining this kind of change, but some people make it. During the Civil Rights movement some people left and risked a great deal to stand up for the rights of others. Some are doing that today, risking their safety and security to help others. It is not easy or simple, but sometimes a sense of calling compels us to choose a different way.

I have shared with some of you a conversation Clarence Jordan had with his brother Robert. He had begun an intentional Christian community in rural Georgia in 1942 where resources were shared and people of different races treated each other as sisters and brothers. As time passed and racial tensions grew, the community, Koinonia Farm, came under attack and so Clarence sought the help of his brother Robert who later became a state senator and a Georgia Supreme Court Judge.

When asked to help, Robert said, “Clarence, I can’t do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I’ve got.” “*We* might lose everything too, Bob,” said Clarence. “It’s different for you,” said Robert. “Why is it different?” asked Clarence, “I remember, it seems to me, you and I joined the church the same Sunday as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”

“I follow Jesus... up to a point,” said Robert. “Could that point by any chance be — the cross?” asked Clarence. “That’s right,” said Robert, “I follow him to the cross, but not *on* the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.” “Then I don’t believe you’re a disciple,” said Clarence, “You’re an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to and tell them you’re an admirer, not a disciple.” “Well now,” said Robert, “If everyone who felt

like I do did that, we wouldn't *have* a church, would we?" "The question," Clarence said, "is, 'Do you have a church?'" (James McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, pp. 127-128).

Brothers can be tough on each other, and this is an extreme case, but sometimes we are called to make choices and leave some things behind to pursue something better — whatever Jesus has in mind — which leads to a second dimension of our calling. We are called to leave certain things *so that* we can follow Jesus in the way of the cross. It's not just about what we leave behind but what we take on as well.

It may not always look like something better, but it is. In our reading from 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul says the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. It is the power of God to bring about our salvation, and it is the power of God to bring healing and hope to others.

Jesus speaks of fishing for people, inviting others into God's realm. He says this realm has come near and thus it is time to repent. And Matthew says he proclaims the good news of God's realm, curing every disease and sickness. This is Jesus' mission, bringing healing and hope to the world, and those who follow Jesus participate in this work.

We do so by shaping a community where all are welcome and invited to learn more about who Jesus is and what it means to follow him. We do so by providing food and clothing to those in need, by offering shelter to the homeless, and by empowering people to find their way to a better life. And we do so whenever we speak up for those who have no voice, those who are marginalized and oppressed, not just in other parts of the world but in our communities too.

Matthew interprets Jesus' ministry as a fulfillment of the vision of Isaiah, of light shining in the darkness. That vision names the region of Zebulun and Naphtali as having known darkness. It was not just any darkness; it was the darkness of Assyrian oppression in the late eighth century BCE. Jesus came amidst Roman oppression of the first century CE. In God's realm the oppressed are delivered into the light of freedom, and as followers of Jesus, we help make this happen.

It is a radical calling, using any definition of the term, but it is God's calling from Isaiah to Jesus to us.