

**Ephesians 4:1-13**

**Matthew 4:12-25**

**January 22, 2023**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **CALLED TO BE DISCIPLES**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Before I interviewed with the Wallace Presbyterian Church Pastor Nominating Committee in October 1997, I was offered a position on the staff of the Presbytery of New Hope, just to the north of us in NE North Carolina. I had been serving part-time as the assistant stated clerk of the presbytery and my boss, the General Presbyter Barbara Campbell Davis, wanted me to accept a full-time position on the staff. I had already begun talking with some other search committees, but Barbara's offer took away all of the unknowns – a job was waiting. Still, I wasn't sure that's what I was called to do, and I told Barbara that. She asked me if I had a certain book of devotions by Frederick Buechner. When I told her I did, she told me to read a particular devotion, pray about it, and then let her know my decision. Here's the devotion she steered me to. It's about "Vocation."

*"There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Super-ego, or Self-Interest.*

*"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 to do most 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 TV deodorant commercials, the chances are that 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 chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either.*

*"Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."<sup>1</sup>*

I called Barbara and told her I had decided to keep searching for a church where I could serve as pastor. She told me she was sorry for her sake that I had made that decision, but glad for me. Not long after that, Wayne Casteen called me on the phone and asked if I was interested in talking to the Pastor Nominating Committee. On Sunday, May 3, 1998, Barbara offered the charge to me in my installation service, which ended with these words, "Phil, your boat has left the shore line of New Hope Presbytery and now you seek other seas. God Bless."

There, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James, and John and said, "Follow me!" and they left their boats on the shoreline behind them, and by Jesus' side they sought other seas. Jesus's "invitation" to the two sets of brothers is really an imperative, "Come after me!" As one writer has put it, "The

command/invitation to Peter, Andrew, James and John to ‘Come, follow me,’ is not: ‘I wonder if you would consider the possibility of tagging along if you have the time, and it’s not too inconvenient.’ The invitation/command to ‘follow’ is to: accompany; learn from; respond to; imitate; be loyal to; bond with; abide in.”<sup>2</sup>

The invitation/command to “Follow me!” is a far cry from our allegiance to Jesus as Lord of life being just another thing on a long list of commendable activities. Jesus’s call to discipleship also gives us a whole new perspective on what it means to be called children of God, called to be saints. Jesus’s invitation/command to “Follow me!” shapes the kind of lives we lead and makes us think about what it means to leave out boats on the shoreline behind and to seek other seas.

William Willimon, Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry and Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Duke Divinity School, offered a somewhat tongue-in-cheek prayer that, sad to say, hits a little too close to home. We might call it “the prayer not to pray if you really want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.” It goes like this: “Lord, here’s what we need today, right away, or as soon as we can get it: we need world peace, prosperity, security, life without risk, pleasure without pain, happiness without cost, and discipleship with no cross. That’s why we’re here, at church, to get our needs met. Our church tries to be user-friendly and seeker sensitive. That’s why on Sundays we serve espresso with a dash of amaretto before our services, a little caffeine boost until we get to the main point of our worship: the prayer requests. So like we were saying, we need a quick recovery from gall bladder surgery, an effortless cataract removal, a happy marriage, obedient and chaste kids, and a reason to get out of bed in the morning. If you love us, you’ll meet our needs. Now then, is there something we could do for you? You’re thirsty? Well, if you’re the Messiah, why don’t you fix yourself a divine drink? We’ve got needs of our own, thank you. It’s our job to have need; it’s your job to meet need. For this and all other needs, spoken and unspoken, felt and unmet, incipient and obvious, personal and corporate, immediate and long term, we pray. Amen.”<sup>3</sup>

When Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James, and John by the Sea of Galilee and said, “Follow me!” he didn’t provide them with a job description or a contract. He didn’t tell them exactly what they would be doing, except “fishing for people” (whatever they thought that meant!). That invitation/command sounds very similar to the Lord’s command to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” So Abram went . . . and he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 12:1-4; 15:6)

Jesus’ invitation/command sounds very similar to the angel Gabriel’s message to Mary, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” And Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:26-38)

The invitation/command sounds similar to what the Lord told Saul on the Damascus Road, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to

things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” And Paul told King Agrippa, “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.” (Acts 26:12-19)

Jesus’ invitation/command to Simon Peter and the other brothers on the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee sounds a lot like Jesus’ invitation/command to Simon Peter on the same shoreline three years later, after Jesus’ death and resurrection. After a breakfast of bread and fish, Jesus asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?” “You know I do, Lord,” answered Peter (not long after he had three times denied even knowing Jesus). Instead of talking about “fishing for people,” Jesus tells Simon Peter to “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” (John 21:15-19) You can read the Book of Acts and find out what Peter did.

Jesus’ invitation/command on the shoreline at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel sounds similar to his commissioning of the eleven disciples on the mountain in Galilee at the end of Matthew’s gospel: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20) Read the rest of the New Testament to find out what those disciples did.

Last week we heard about how God calls us to be saints, not because we are perfect, but because God has work for us to do. Frederick Buechner says essentially the same thing about being called disciples. He writes, “There is no evidence that Jesus chose them because they were brighter or nicer than other people. . . Their sole qualification seems to have been their initial willingness to rise to their feet when Jesus said, ‘Follow me.’ When Jesus sent the twelve out into the world, his instructions were simple. He told them to preach the Kingdom of God and to heal (Luke 9:2), with the implication that to do either right was in effect to do both. Fortunately for the world in general and the church in particular, the ability to do them is not dependent on either moral character or IQ. To do them in the name of Christ is to be a minister. In the name of Christ not to do them is a bad joke.”<sup>4</sup>

During our Bible study at Tuesday night’s session meeting, we read this story about Jesus calling Simon, Andrew, James, and John and saying, “Follow me!” We read an article called “Instilling a Sense of Call” which begins with these words, “All of God’s people are called to discipleship. Jesus’ invitation to Simon, Andrew, James, John, and to his other disciples, is the same invitation he extends to us today. ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people’” and ends with these words, “The call of God is both internal and external – and it is life-changing.” We listened to a sermon by Rev. Jim Sommerville, senior pastor of the First Baptist Church in Richmond, VA about our vocation/calling and identity as the people of God and disciples of Jesus. We had a good discussion about what it means to be faithful to Jesus Christ in all of life in the midst of living life, no matter what your job or vocation might be.

As I looked around the table, I appreciated the wide variety of vocations/professions represented: teachers, business people, law enforcement, CPA, military vet, real estate broker, lawyer. When I look out at the congregation this morning and think about the members of this church, I appreciate the even wider variety of vocations/professions and the abundance of gifts God has blessed this church with. And I'm struck by what one of our elders said Tuesday night as he summed up what we had talked about: "Follow Jesus – everything else is a side gig."

I think that is the essence of Jesus's invitation/command to Simon, Andrew, James, and John on the shoreline and Jesus's invitation/command to you and me today. We are called to be saints, set apart for God's work. We are called to be disciples, to follow Jesus where he leads us. That is our primary identity as God's people, and our identity will shape what we do as God's people and disciples of Jesus Christ.

At handbell practice Wednesday night, Karla told us about something the director of "The Ringing Nativity" handbell performance in Washington, D.C. taught them a couple of weeks ago. She said when the director was going to cut off the bells from ringing, he didn't make a big flourish with his hands and arms. Rather, he slowly drew his hands into his chest and clinched his fingers together. "Just like that," Karla said, "all forty ringers stopped ringing at the same time." The director told them, "Don't just look at me. Follow me!"

To Simon, Andrew, James, and John on the shoreline, Jesus said, "Don't just look at me. Follow me!"

To you and me today, Jesus still says, "Don't just look at me. Follow me!"  
Follow me – everything else is just a side gig.

***Let us pray: O God, we thank you for searching for us. We take delight knowing you smile when you call us by name. Give us joy to follow wherever Jesus leads us. In his name, we pray. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Frederick Buechner, originally published in *Wishful Thinking*.

<sup>2</sup>David Ewart, "Matthew 4:12-23," [www.holytextures.com](http://www.holytextures.com).

<sup>3</sup>William H. Willimon, *The Best of William H. Willimon: Acting Up in Jesus' Name*.

<sup>4</sup>Buechner, *ibid*.