

I've not done any kind of scientific study and I don't have the benefit of a scholarly consensus on this opinion but on flipping through the Gospel according to Matthew in my old "Red Letter" edition Bible this week, I came to the conclusion that Matthew is far more a book of the words of Jesus than a book of words about Jesus. Obviously, there are some exceptions to this. The first 4 chapters, which include a genealogy, a birth and infancy narrative, the work of John the Baptist and Jesus' own baptism, and the beginning of Jesus' ministry, are all primarily narrative, as are the chapters telling the passion story. But throughout the rest of this first book of our New Testament, page after page is predominantly, if not completely, given over to Jesus' preaching, as is rapidly evident in the "red letter" tradition.

So, taking a cue from the Gospel writer this morning, I'm going to focus on the two sayings of Jesus in this passage and primarily upon the second: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people;" or, in the words we probably all learned and sang as children, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Both that saying of Jesus and the earlier, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," represent the earliest examples in Matthew of Jesus calling to other people, making a request of them, even a demand upon them. To hear and respond to a call from Jesus means a radical change in way of life or focus or both. It is the timeless equivalent of those governmental letters that were so infamous when I was a child, the ones that came from the Selective Service Board and began, "Greetings..." A summons from Jesus is even more life changing than a summons from Uncle Sam. As Dr. Thomas Long of Candler School of Theology wrote in his commentary on this passage, "The patterns of our lives are not made secure by the kingdom of heaven; the kingdom of heaven rearranges them into the new design of God's own making."

Jesus' call to these four fishermen and to us is both individual and collective. Individual in that we are each called from where we are, according to our gifts, to specific (sometimes changing) tasks. Collective in that we are all called to join the Beloved Community and to further that community, the Kingdom of heaven in Matthew's terminology.

First, we are called in a way that honors our individuality. We are called as who we are, starting from where we are. Jesus speaks to Andrew and Peter in a way that is very specific to who they are – they are fishermen, making their living by wading into the Sea of Galilee with their nets, throwing them as far as they can, and pulling up whatever fish they can to sell that day. They are men who understand hard, repetitive work, done for what may be very little payoff at the end of the day. In some ways, Jesus is calling them to a very similar work as his apostles, work that will be difficult and repetitive as they travel with him from town to town and village to village proclaiming a Good News that not everyone will even want to hear, much less respond to. This calling is specifically for Andrew and Simon Peter; the "fishers of men" phrase is not even repeated to the Sons of Zebedee. And yet, despite how this calling addresses them as whom and what they are at the moment of calling, it also promises deep changes for them. It is a far different thing to fish for people than to fish for fish. It's doubtful that Simon and Andrew have any idea what they are getting themselves into. Audrey West of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago writes, "All that is asked of them at this point is simply that they follow: as they are, from where they are, being who they are. As is true for the followers of Jesus who come after them, the meaning of their choice will unfold only over time."

Indeed, so it is for us. Jesus begins with us where we are, according to our gifts and talents, then takes us to places we could not have imagined on our own. The fact that Jesus continues to encounter and call us as individuals today, just as he did with his first followers, means that our multiplicity of gifts leads to a wide variety of callings. It is a truth that a later apostle, Paul, recognized and upheld in his writing about the Body of Christ with all its different parts. Yet all, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, is by the same Spirit and for the same Lord; all is to the greater glory of God and the building of God's Beloved Community. Some of us are called to work in positions that everyone sees as being directly connected to the Kingdom of heaven – some are pastors or seminary professors or workers in agencies sponsored by churches or denominations. But some of us are called to work in fields that have no overt ministry component. This is no less a calling than that to what we sometimes call “full-time ministry.” God's Kingdom is built in ways other than preaching and teaching the Bible. To create the Beloved Community requires action on all levels of society, changing the paradigms of every part of common human life from self-centeredness and brokenness to the healthy, loving vision of the Creator for the Creation that God called good.

A few years ago, an article in Christianity Today summarized the work of several authors on how Jesus' calling works itself out in the lives of those working in what some might term “secular” fields. (One of these days, by the way, I'm going to have to find the right venue for some conversation with you all on the distinction between “sacred” and “secular” and why I'm not at all sure it's valid. But that's for a different day.) That article focused in on three basic principles. “First,” it said, “the Christian's calling in the business world is not primarily about evangelism. Nor is it about being “nice.” As good as those things may be, business is fundamentally about serving others... Business for the Christian is a form of neighbor-love, a way to fulfill the second Great Commandment.” The writers of the article went on to cite one of the world's most successful investors, the billionaire, Sir John Templeton. Templeton wrote, “My advice to a school of business management is to teach the business manager to give unlimited love, and he'll be more successful.” There is almost always a market for a quality product, fairly priced. People will generally want to work for and do their best work for a manager who treats them with respect and caring. To follow the precepts of Christ in the business world joins the pursuit of the Beloved Community with sound business practice.

“Second,” says that Christianity Today article, “the calling of those who engage in business is as noble as those God calls to more “spiritual” pursuits. Luther dropped a bombshell on the late medieval world when he wrote: “The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone.”” No matter the kind of work we engage in, if we engage in it with the idea of serving God and God's creation, then we are doing what those Baptist preachers used to call “Kingdom work.” If we feel that God has called us into a work, then it is God's work we do, whether it be teaching, farming, digging ditches or selling insurance. I have a good friend in Louisville who feels called into real estate. He sees it as a sacred duty to help people find the right house in which to make their home, raise their family, rest from their own daily work. He finds a level of contentment in the work even when the market is bad because of the lives he has touched.

“Third,” and finally in that short article, “work is part of the good creation that God blessed before the advent of sin.” The writers remind us that Adam and Eve were called to dress and keep the garden before they shared the forbidden fruit. It is in our God-given nature to work; only our own brokenness and the powers of destruction in the world around us make work drudgery.

To that article’s list of virtues to be found by Christians in the workplace, I would add a fourth: it is impossible for the work of so-called “sacred” organizations to function in the real world without the business sense of those who work in “secular” fields. As I hope you all know, the team working on our Senior Housing project has spent a good deal of time in the last few weeks recruiting members for the board of directors of the non-profit corporation that will own and operate Good Shepherd Senior Housing. We are looking for people with a variety of skills and experiences gained in the business world because they will be running a business. I’m delighted that the board will include three members of this congregation (Steve Calkins, Lynn Melby and Mark Sutton) who own their own businesses and bring a wealth of expertise to the table. They will be joined by Mark Smith, a former professor and current City Council member; Tom Carlton, a financial consultant; and (probably) by an attorney and an accountant, as well as others still to be identified. From my experience as a non-profit executive, I can tell you, that is an excellent core for a board. Nor could the rest of our ministries here function without the business experience and talents all of you bring to the life of this church. Since we celebrate the Baptist tradition of “every member a minister,” I could single out each and every one of you for the contributions you make to our joint ministries but I hope no one will be offended if I mention one new leader and one leadership post in transition. I’m thrilled that Meggie Lavelle will be living out part of her calling as a teacher to lead our youth group for the next several months. She’ll kick off that ministry the last week of February with a renewed focus on the Thirty-Hour Famine and I know she’ll have a lot of fun and meaningful things to do with our youth. I also want to thank Judy Meyer for her many years of organizing the auction which is such a significant part of our budget each year and to remind you all that Judy has issued her own call for a disciple to work with her in preparations this year and to pick up her mantle next year.

You see, we are called to specific tasks in creating the Beloved Community and sometimes our tasks change over the years. When Simon Peter was called away from his net that day, his task first of all was to learn so that he could later teach others. As Jesus began to send his followers out to do that teaching, he sent them first only to their fellow Jews. As he departed this physical life, he changed that for Peter and the rest to go to the ends of the earth. At first, Peter continued to work only with Jews, just further afield, until he came to realize that the Good News was for the Gentiles as well. Peter’s working out of his calling changed and changed again, but it was always about moving humankind towards God.

I know there are some of you here today who can identify with having a calling that changes over time. I certainly can, although I can see more of a through-line (what we old actors call a “spine”) in my working out of my calling than most people suspect. And I can also see how my calling and the working out of it show God honoring my own passions as well as my gifts. As Frederick Buechner wrote, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s hunger meet.” My first calling experience came when I was about 16 and resulted in my being “licensed to the Gospel Ministry” as those old Southern Baptist Convention

certificates used to say. In those days, I was convinced I was going to go right from a degree in Psychology to seminary to the pulpit. During my college years, however, it became apparent to me for a variety of reasons that would not be my path and I felt moved to explore how I might serve God and God's people with my gifts and experience in the theatre. As I moved towards graduation from Rice, I still felt compelled, however, to apply to seminary, feeling that graduate studies in Divinity would compliment my degree and professional experience in theatre. As Charlie Scalise could attest, at my graduation from Southern Seminary, I was focused on gaining further professional experience in theatre so that I could start my own faith-based production company. Things didn't work out quite that way, although I did serve as an executive at two of the largest theatres in the U.S. with a Christian mission. Perhaps most importantly, as I look back on my career path, I can see God's calling and guiding hand in all of the twists and turns that eventually led me here, to a pastoral post as I had originally envisioned but undoubtedly far better suited and prepared than I might have been if I'd stuck to my original plan. I'm a great proponent of planning, as some of you know, but I'm also very aware of the truth of that old saying, "Man proposes and God disposes."

I'm also very aware, as I'm sure many of you are, that although, as the old song goes, "I wouldn't take nothing for my journey, now," following the calling of Jesus can be hard work. That shouldn't come as a surprise, especially since Jesus' first calling to two individuals was "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Fishing in that time and place was not about sitting under a tree with a pole and a cold beverage. It was, as I mentioned before, hard work; hard, hot, back-breaking, never-ending work, resulting in subsistence, not riches. A couple of weeks ago, Pam Scalise mentioned in Sunday School the old chorus, "Every Day with Jesus is Sweeter than the Day Before." There is certainly a sense in which that is true, but we must also remember that we find in Matthew's Gospel another remark from Jesus about living out a life under his calling. "Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'" We cannot seek to follow the call of Jesus thinking that we will be rewarded as the world understands reward. Our rewards are of a far different and more lasting kind. We may very well not experience the "payoff" of our work towards the Beloved Community in our lifetime, yet our faith in the ultimate victory of God, in the Kingdom inaugurated by the resurrection of Christ Jesus, tells us that the reward will come. Fishing is still a good metaphor. Scottish novelist John Buchan said, "The charm of fishing is that it is the pursuit of what is elusive but attainable, a perpetual series of occasions for hope."

As I said at the outset, the call of Jesus is both individual and collective. As much as each of us is called individually to a place and a work that is uniquely our own, we all are called with a basic calling. It is to turn away from brokenness, self-centeredness and fear and to embrace the possibility of life as our Creator desires it for us, with health, with love and with peace. The language with which we have traditionally translated Jesus' first calling in this passage, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," has gathered too much baggage to be truly Good News in Western Washington in 2008. But to realize that Jesus was and is offering a way to change our lives for the better, offering us a place in God's Beloved Community, to experience the love of both God and our neighbors as well as extending it ourselves, that is truly Good News in any age and place. For some, the image of "fishing for people" may seem ominous, full of snares and hooks and being dragged out of one's native element. Some commentators believe

that Jesus was making his own clever reference to Scripture. Jeremiah 16 also contains a reference to God's fishers amongst the people of Israel: "I am now sending for many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall catch them; and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks. For my eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from my presence, nor is their iniquity concealed from my sight." But it is important to put this reference into context as well; God is searching for the people in order to cleanse them and restore them to their proper place. Hear now this word of promise through the prophet Jeremiah: "Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, "As the Lord lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt," but "As the Lord lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them." For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their ancestors." For all the peoples of the earth, the ultimate home is found in the Beloved Community of God. As we grow in our faith in Jesus, accepting both the love and the power of God in our lives to move beyond the power of destruction, so we move towards our true home.

And as we are all called, in our individual callings, to collectively move out of the darkness and towards the light, as we recall in this season of Epiphany, so are we all called to invite our neighbors to join us on that blessed journey. Jesus said, "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." It is a promise for all of us; it is a calling for all of us. And it is a privilege beyond measure for all of us to be a part of bringing our sisters and brothers to the new life in the love of God. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns;" a message recalled by Paul when writing to the Romans. Jesus calls us to live out our true bliss in his company, in the Beloved Community, in the Kingdom of heaven. With such a calling, how can we not answer? Jesus is calling. Let all the people answer, "Lord, here I am."