

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

January 22, 2017

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 4:12-23

Being and Doing

The question for today is: How do we become followers of Christ?

It was also the question last week, and we have in these two weeks two different ways that we come to follow Christ.

Last week we heard in the Gospel of John that the first followers of Jesus went off following him without having met him yet. They went on the word of someone else, who was pointing out that Jesus is the ONE who will make all things new. And we noticed also, that Jesus didn't invite them or call them or notice them until AFTER they'd started following him.

This week we have a different version of the same thing — how the first disciples came to follow Jesus.

Here Jesus sees them (two of them - at least one was the same as last week, Andrew) - Jesus sees them, and notices them — and simply says “follow me” and just as simply, they do. And then he, Jesus, does it again. Two more people, follow me, and they do.

As I said last week, I love that we get different versions of how the disciples came to hang out with Jesus.... Because that's how it still is for us.... We come to follow Jesus in different ways!

These two versions can be summed up like this:

Sometimes we're curious about Jesus and so we start after him

Sometimes Jesus is curious about us and issues the invitation first

And there are of course other versions...and perhaps yours doesn't fit either of these!

But what is the same — and the most important — is that it is Jesus whom we follow! That we don't just consult the word of God (Bible) to affirm our own biases, but that we look for the living Word of God (Jesus) and follow his call on our lives.

Sometimes I wonder if we get it backwards: We decide what we want to do, and then invite Jesus to tag along with us.

Because being a Christian does not mean we seek out Jesus and ask him to participate in what we are doing. Rather the Christian life is about Jesus' call on our lives, and then our response to that.

Now this was easy for Peter, Andrew, James and John, because it was clear to them who Jesus was - he was right there, in front of them — living, breathing, walking, talking. It's not so easy for us I don't think — how are we supposed to know what Jesus' invitation or voice or call sounds like or looks like?

Here are just three features of what I think Jesus call will look like:

Always be in line with his teachings of love and acceptance and generosity

Often cause you to go against the grain of what is popular or culturally expected

Sometimes will require you to leave behind a way of life or a place or a person

After all, “repent” — means turn around. The fact that the first four disciples left behind nets, boats, and fathers is a sign that following Jesus not always convenient. In fact, if anything gets in the way of our following Jesus, we're to leave it behind.

Our careers, material possessions, and families, should function in the service of God's mission and further the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Understanding our lives in this way is to recognize that God calls us — each and every one of us. And He calls us in different ways.

Some years ago, a colleague of mine participated in a research grant on this topic and one of their findings was that very few Christians actually felt called by God. That is, very few believed that what they did with most of their time mattered to God and the church, or made a particular difference in the world.

They discovered that many Christians have a hard time seeing a direct a connection between what they do and what they believe, which is why they don't feel called.

But what if we "turn around" our thinking on that.... What if we stop focusing on what we DO and consider who we ARE. Maybe God's call isn't simply to *do* something, but rather to *be* something, a child of God. Maybe being comes before doing. Maybe being even makes doing possible.

I wonder, is that what made it possible for John the Baptist to proclaim the coming Christ and challenge the powers that be, even when it meant his imprisonment and eventual death? That he knew God had called him to *be* the forerunner for Christ?

I wonder, is that what summoned such an immediate response from Peter and Andrew, James and John, that they felt called to *be* more than they had imagined? They probably have no idea what being "fishers of people" even means, but they do know that Jesus sees something in them, something of value and worth. They have no idea where they will go, or what they will do, but they do know that Jesus is calling them to *be* his disciples, and they trust that the rest will become clear in time.

So, my friends — hear God's call on your life — that you are called to *be* a child of God. And what this means is that God values and honors and loves you. And as you grow more and more in your identity as God's children, you will discover over time all kinds of things to do in response.

Because, in fact, everything we do can be done with this sense of "call." We are followers of Christ in ALL that we do... think about it - we don't just follow Christ in some areas of our lives and not in others. "I think I'll be a Christian parent, but not a Christian coach. I think I'll be a Christian employee, but not a Christian friend."

Martin Luther thought and wrote a lot about this — what being a Christian means for our daily lives. And he says this about how our Christian life impacts our work lives:

The Christian shoemaker does his duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.

How we do things is what matters. And most of your "doing" — that is, living out your calling — will come through your relationships.

But, this calling isn't only for individuals, it's also for our life together as the church. I believe God is calling us to be the gathering of God's beloved children, to be a place of welcome and acceptance, to be a sanctuary where God's word is taught, the good news of the kingdom is proclaimed, and all find healing.

Who we are is what we will do. The church — the faithful church — is not an end in itself, but rather the means through which God works out his purposes here on earth. We might not get Jesus walking past our houses while we're working in the garden or shoveling snow. Jesus probably won't be walking the halls of our schools or the office buildings where we work, saying, "Hey, put down that file, close your laptop and follow me!"

The "Jesus on earth" we've got is this — the church. Where, and through which, God is continuing to work miracles, and provide healing.

The story goes about the camp counselor who was leading a group of little children on the topic of the church. He asked the children to draw a picture of the church. He assumed that they would draw a picture of the church building, which most did. But there was one 8 year old girl who did not.

Instead she drew 5 pictures on her one piece of paper. In the upper left corner she drew a picture of a woman in bed with people surrounding her. She explained that that was her grandmother in a hospital bed and the people around her were the pastor and people from the church praying for her healing.

In the upper right hand corner, she drew a picture of a can. She said that there were hungry people in the world and God does not want people to be hungry so the church shared its food.

In the bottom right corner, she drew a picture of a group of people playing.

In the bottom left corner, she drew music notes with people of different sizes and of different colors. She said that God loves all people, and the church gathers to sing thank-you to God.

In the middle of the paper, big enough to invade the space of each picture's space and to connect them, she drew a big heart — God is love, she said, and we are supposed to love God and to love everyone.

Being and doing — that's a church which is following Jesus.
And may it be our church! Amen.