

Storytelling is always interesting, as we seldom tell a story the same way every time. Depending on the storyteller new elements might be added to the story, maybe a comment on the weather or what someone was wearing. Some storytellers make their stories longer and longer and longer, so you begin to think they will never end. Others like to add a moral to their story. When stories are passed down orally, from person to person, generation to generation, even when the story is about a person's life we will be presented with slightly different versions.

So it is with the Gospels. Each Gospel offers a slightly different version of Jesus' actions, his life, and how he was understood, by the disciples, the religious elite and the crowds. The same is true with Jesus' invitation to the disciples. Matthew and Mark offer the most similar accounts with Jesus walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and calling out to Simon and Andrew who are casting a net off the shore and then calling to James and John, the sons of Zebedee, to come and follow as he, Jesus, will make them into fishers of people.¹

John's Gospel offers the most unique account of the calling of the disciples. When Andrew, one of the disciples of John the Baptist, heard Jesus speak he recruited his brother Simon to join him by saying I have found the Messiah. The next day, as Jesus was making his way back to Galilee, he asked Philip to come and follow. And then suggested to Nathanael, who questioned if anything good could come from Nazareth, to come and see.²

Luke's account of the call of the first disciples is similar to that of Matthew and Mark as Jesus is walking along the south shore of the Sea of Galilee. From Luke we learn that Simon and Andrew and the Zebedee brothers are business partners. Jesus gets into Simon's boat requesting him to take him a short distance from the shore so he can speak to the crowd that has been following him since he left Capernaum. Simon Peter was obviously willing to comply with this request, even after having spent a long night on the lake with only an empty net to show for the effort.

After speaking to the crowd, Jesus then tells Simon to go out to deeper water and to once again drop his nets. I am sure Simon was thinking this is fruitless. But then again he complies. And to his amazement the net is so full of fish that the net is beginning to break. So many fish have been caught that both boats – Simon's and the boat of the Zebedee boys – are nearly swamped by the abundance of the catch. That is one heck of a miracle.

¹ Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16-20

² John 1: 35-51

If their boats we built in a style similar to the one found at the bottom of the Sea of Galilee, they would not have been very big. The one resurrected from the mud after 2000 years was less than 30 feet in length and not quite 8 feet wide. The boat had a draft of around 5 feet and was powered by sail and oars.³ Even though the boats would not be considered large, by today's standards, the amount of fish caught is still mindboggling. And fortunately fish was the main source of protein in this part of Palestine, so the abundant catch would not have gone to waste.⁴

So I want to invite you to imagine that you are the captain on Simon's boat. What would your first reaction have been to this amazing catch? Maybe the thought might occur to you that this guy Jesus is better than any fish finder on the market. And that you just might want to have him on your team.

If such thoughts were going through Simon's mind, they were kept silent. Simon's is a reaction from the heart rather than a reaction based on head knowledge. Through his actions and words Simon Peter expresses an understanding of who the person standing before him is as well as the enormity of the miracle. He confesses that as a human he is not worthy to be in the presence of the divine. He recognizes, that the person standing before him is not just another guy. And so he says to Jesus, "I am a sinful person! You do not want to be tainted by me. So please go away."

And Jesus, rather than saying, "yep, you are a sinner," ignores Simon's statement and invites him to join him. What an interesting idea to be invited to, "cast nets to catch people rather than fish. To catch people for the kingdom of God."

What would your reaction be, if you were told you would be casting nets to catch people for the kingdom of God? Would you think of those words as being an invitation or something akin to a death sentence? Would we, like Simon, Andrew, James and John, be willing to drop everything and follow Jesus? Or would we come up with a laundry list of excuses – such as "my ficus tree needs to be dusted, or I don't like being in crowds, or I have kids who need my attention, or I am not healthy enough to travel, or I have no training to do this type of work." I think we all have our favorite excuses.

³ New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes: Vol IX, (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1995), 116.

⁴ New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes: Vol IX, 116.

I always marvel at the trust and faith the disciples have in Jesus. They are willing to risk all to learn from this amazing teacher. Another thing that strikes me as being unusual about the call of the disciples is that Jesus doesn't go to the rich and famous, he doesn't go to those in power, or those with philosophy degrees. Jesus recruits ordinary working people who may or may not have an education and who most likely live from paycheck to paycheck. He invites folks like us to join him and in so doing he invites us to a whole new way of being.

What we realize from the disciples calls, is God calls us where we are, within our own context. And if we ignore God's call, or if we don't know that it is God calling us, God keeps at us until we are ready to accept. As it says in the Psalms, "The Lord will fulfill his purpose, finish what has been started, make complete, the work God has already started within us."⁵

What is amazing about answering and accepting God's call is that it is transformative, our view of life and our relationship with God changes. We change because to accept a call from God requires us to set new priorities in our lives, so that the work God calls us to do, comes first. We relinquish control as God has taken the lead in our lives. Which is in itself a radical way of living. Using the metaphor of a truck or an airplane, you may have heard God referred to as the co-pilot of our lives. But the reality is, when we accept God's call, whatever that call may be, God becomes the pilot of our lives and we go wherever God takes us.

But a call is not always understood. Several years ago at Annual Conference we were talking about our callings. A woman, I don't recall what church she was from, kept asking, "what is a call?" In her mind a call from God is something that applies to those who are destined for seminary and then serving in fulltime ministry in some capacity. She had a hard time accepting that a call comes to each of us. As Eugene Peterson said, "I believe God takes the things in our lives - family, background, education - and uses them as part of his calling. It might not be to become a pastor. But doesn't God waste anything."⁶ God uses the gifts we have been given to further the work of God's kingdom here on earth.

Mike Yaconelli expresses a similar understanding of being called. He suggests "a call is the place where your gifts, abilities, desires, and feelings of worth all meet. When you follow your calling, you feel at home, at peace - you feel as

⁵ Psalm 138:8a

⁶ Brainy Quote, "Eugene Peterson," accessed online 3 February 2019 @ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/eugene_h_peterson_528428

though you're where you're meant to be.”⁷ Through our life experiences and our unique combination of spiritual gifts, God calls us where we are meant to be, whether it as a musician, a plumber, a teacher, an usher, a counter, a liturgist, a pastor or a greeter. The question is are we listening to what God is saying to us?

Of course there is always a problem in discerning if a call is really a call. As God is not inclined to use email, snail mail, or voice mail, let alone send us a text, it is not always easy to figure out what God is trying to tell us. It is often hard to discern if it is God talking to us versus our listening to the voice of the crowd or the voice of our egos.

But calls come to us in many different ways. Sometimes a call comes to us in the voice and urging of a pastor, a friend, a teacher, a mentor, or from a group that has supported us over the years. Possibly an event or incident in our lives, or in the world, may be the catalyst that enables us to respond in the affirmative to God. And sometimes, the ultimate call is so outside of our experience, that we may receive a series of calls. Each calling being part of the transformative process needed to move one into a position to understand and accept where God has been leading us. To understand a call we need to prayerfully consider what the call is all about and whether it will help build the kingdom of God or help build our personal empire.

And then even if we are able to discern God's call are we willing to make the changes needed in our lives? Are we willing to reframe our priorities? If we, like the disciples, are to cast nets for the kingdom of God that is exactly what we need to do. As hard as it may be to accept, we are all called to make God's way our way. Amen

⁷ Brainy Quote, "Mike Yaconelli," accessed online 6 February 2019 @ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/mike_yaconelli_825317