

## Calling and Following Nehemiah 8: 9-12    Mark 1:16-20 & 2:13-14

Following Jesus' baptism and the announcement of good news—that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand—here is what happens next in Mark's gospel:

### **Mark 1:16-20 and 2:13-14**

<sup>16</sup>As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup>And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” <sup>18</sup>And immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>19</sup>As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. <sup>20</sup>Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

(Now 2:13-14; following some healings)

Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth (this is Matthew), and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him.

This is the word of the Lord.

I'd like to begin by defining a word that doesn't actually appear in our reading this morning. But it does appear frequently in the gospels and the book of Acts, and sometimes in our worship liturgy and in the hymns and songs that we sing on Sundays. And I use it occasionally in sermons and shouldn't assume that everyone is familiar with this word. And I'm going to use it this morning. It's the word “disciple,” or “discipleship.” We might talk or sing about being disciples of

Jesus, or about discipleship *with* Jesus. And although the word doesn't appear in our reading today it is often used to describe what *takes place* in our reading: Jesus calling his first disciples. In fact, that is the very heading that is used in the chair Bible ("Jesus calls the first disciples"). What do we mean by that?

Very simply, the word disciple means "learner." Or student, or apprentice. One who learns from a mentor, or a guide. So, disciples are learners, apprentices with Jesus; students of his way, or *The (capital W) Way* of Jesus as it is called several times in the book of Acts. I love it that the early Christians referred to themselves as followers of *The Way*, as well as disciples. They saw themselves as practitioners and learners. People on a *journey* of faith. They didn't refer to themselves as people of The Doctrine. The early church was built upon praxis—on learning spiritual practices; learning to love God and love neighbor, in the Way (manner) of Jesus.

We'll see this starting next week, because following this morning's passage, we are going to see Jesus begin to teach and show what it means to follow the Way, the Jesus Way.

What I'd like to do this morning is to take a few moments to reflect on our understanding of our calling, our discipleship, for today's world, in 2024.

I thought of some questions that this passage raised for me:

- What kind of disciples does Jesus need, and want for *our time, and place*?
- What does Jesus want us to learn? Since disciples are learners. Another way to put this: how does he want to equip us? (again, for our time & place)
- And what does it mean for *each of us*, in our unique life situations and circumstances, to be a disciple? We don't come from the same discipleship cookie cutter, or mold. We have unique personalities, and backgrounds, and skills and interests. We're at different ages and stages of life, with different amounts of time and energy available to us. So, how do we follow Jesus, given who *we are*, *and*, who and what the *world* is right now?

I don't presume to have the answers to those questions—but they'll pop up occasionally during our journey with Jesus through Mark. They're good and important questions for us right now.

This morning I'd like to emphasize two things, generally, based on what Mark, along with the other gospel writers, tell us, about the call to discipleship:

1. Jesus called a diverse group of ordinary people to follow him. This morning we have the accounts of 5 of the disciples being called, which would grow to 12 eventually. We don't know much about all these folks, but what we *do* know tells us that it was a surprising dozen! They were a combination of

fishermen, a tax collector (who would've been despised by the majority of people), a member of the Zealot party (zealots were political revolutionaries), artisans, and business persons.

Like I said, there is no cookie cutter approach to being a disciple. And, getting people to follow him wasn't Jesus' challenge. In fact, it seemed quite easy for him to gather a cohort of 12 close followers.

Note: these people probably knew Jesus before this; Jesus didn't have some magical power over strangers to compel them to follow him; we have a clue from the other gospels that these men and Jesus were at least acquainted, and perhaps had spent time together, as Jesus began to announce the good news that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. So when Jesus now calls them to follow, they had enough information about Jesus to make a decision.

So Jesus' challenge wasn't gathering a group of disciples; his challenge was getting this diverse group to work together, and stick together. We'll see, especially in Mark's gospel, that this wasn't easy. And, btw, this is the apostle Paul's main theme in all of his letters, as he is consistently and urgently making appeals for unity in the early church.

The good news is: Jesus calls all kinds of wonderful and unique people to follow him. Yay! The hard news is: we don't always agree or get along! So, this is

why we are told that our main virtue, our essential practice, is love. And, to use the apostle Paul's phrase, to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

A great Biblical example of this diversity is found in Romans 16, which is nothing but a list of names of people Paul wants to greet. It's like he's reading the city of Rome's phone book. Most of us would skip over this chapter because on the surface it isn't very interesting.

But thank God for a British scholar named FF Bruce, who studied every name in that list. And you know what he discovered? That this was the most eclectic collection of people around at that time. This was anything but the "homogeneous unit" that church growth folks used to talk about back in the 80's and 90's—where you get like-minded people from the same demographic group together, because they will attract more like-minded people from the same demographic group, and that's how you grow the church. That's the homogenous unit principle and strategy. Which is really an unbiblical practice. Because, the early church was a community of a beautiful variety of people, much like Jesus' first disciples. Back to Romans 16...

What FF Bruce discovered in this list of names of people that the apostle greets was that the Roman church was as diverse as it gets in the early church.

There were aristocratic wealthy people, like this woman Phoebe who Paul describes as a benefactor. There were poor people. There were slaves (we know that because slaves were given different names than Roman citizens). There is a man in the list who was part of the theatre, the performing arts. There were tradesmen. There were married couples; there were single people. There were people from Africa. There was a Roman politician in the list. There were political revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow people like the Roman politician. This is anything but a church of people who have a lot in common. But the one thing they all *did* have in common was... faith in Jesus Christ, and a calling to follow the *Way of Christ*, together, unified by the Holy Spirit. Why else would a group that diverse come together, and remain together?

So, Jesus called a diverse group of everyday people to follow him. And therefore his church, at its best, reflects that diversity. No matter what your background or situation, the church welcomes you. And, the church *needs* you! We are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and Jesus needs your unique light and your unique saltiness.

2. Jesus' call to discipleship is a *joyful* call to purpose, and to potential. It's a joyful call to purpose and potential.

Jesus does not say, “Follow me, and I will straighten you out, and save you from the fire of hell.” No, Jesus’ calling is a winsome *invitation* to be part of God’s Kingdom work on earth. When Jesus says “follow me and I will make you catch people,” that’s a winsome invitation, given to fishermen who would’ve chuckled at it.

Jesus doesn’t frighten anyone into following him, nor does Jesus get out a clipboard and pen to issue a test, with a checklist of items to determine whether or not a person is worthy to follow. As we saw last week, he begins his ministry by proclaiming *good news, to all*, and then (we’ll see next week) his first acts of ministry are those of healing people. That’s a pretty great start! That’s a positive, joyful beginning to his ministry.

But before he begins his healing ministry and exhibiting other Kingdom realities, he calls his first disciples. And he does so in a winsome way: he tells fishermen, “I’ll make you fishers of people.” That’s playful, and winsome. I can imagine this being said with a smile and a sense of encouragement. Jesus wants to take something they know how to do and transform their skills for a new purpose. Now, this was for fishermen, not for everyone. He didn’t say to Levi the tax collector, “I’ll make you a fisher of people” because that would’ve sounded

weird to him and might have even been a turnoff. Think of a job, today, and how Jesus would reframe that, or reinterpret that, as Kingdom ministry.

Notice: Jesus didn't tell them that what they were doing was wrong, or a waste of time. He said, "Let's take your skill and use it in a new way."

So, the invitation to discipleship is a joyful one. And we need to find joy, choose joy, have joy, as we involve ourselves to meet the world's needs in our time and our local context. We need joy, not as an escape—Jesus didn't say "Follow me, and let's escape from this mess and go find some distractions to enjoy ourselves with"—discipleship isn't an escape from the world, but an engagement with the world; therefore we need joy as a way of strengthening ourselves as we engage in the challenges of our time.

Much like Nehemiah knew that the people of their time, following the destruction of Jerusalem, needed to be strengthened for the challenges they were facing. "The joy of the Lord is your strength," he told them. They needed to shift from the intensity of their work and the grief over what they were recovering from, to the joy that would strengthen them for the days ahead, which would help them envision the new possibilities amidst the challenges of their time. Just like we need joy to strengthen us for the possibilities and challenges of our time.



And we have challenges, don't we? We, today, have three main challenges as I see it: we have a planet problem, a poverty problem, and a peace problem.

We have a *planet* problem in that we're setting new records every year with warming temperatures, with the hot places getting hotter and drier, and the wet places experiencing more devastating storms, and with all of it bringing soil depletion, and disruption of the oceans and the exponential increase of extinctions in both animal and plant populations. One climate scientist says we are committing ecocide against the web of life on earth.

We also have a *poverty* problem, with the unequal distribution of wealth and power, concentrating more and more wealth and power among a tiny minority of people. We see this problem before our very eyes in our region with the skyrocketing cost of housing, and the parallel increase in homelessness.

And we have a *peace* problem. Which means, we know we *have* problems, and that the planet problem and the poverty problem can potentially create deeper division and competition over resources, so what do we do? We disseminate more and more weapons—literal weapons like guns, and rhetorical weapons that aim to harm or destroy in other ways.

In all of these there is hope, and positive changes *are* being made. But for us to stay engaged and active and helpful as we participate in these positive changes, we are going to need joy.

*And*, we need to affirm each other in our unique ways of being active (again, because there is no cookie cutter form of discipleship, or involvement). Some of us will live out our discipleship and be active in an *out-and-about* sort of way—on the streets with the homeless, at town hall meetings, or civic organizations or actively volunteering. Some of us will exercise our discipleship and be active in *quiet* ways—writing letters and emails, or supporting one person who is doing good work, or giving financially to organizations that are helping turn the tide on our challenges.

And however we are active—however we live out our discipleship—we need joy—because, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 14:17, “The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Right action, peacefulness and peace-making, and joy.

I’d like to quote (again) a winsome and wise Christian leader named Gary Haugen. Gary is the President of International Justice Mission. IJM exists to eradicate human trafficking and slavery worldwide. It’s a Christian organization.

*Their mission:* “IJM’s mission is to protect people in poverty from violence by rescuing victims, bringing criminals to justice, restoring survivors to safety and strength, and helping local law enforcement build a safe future that lasts.” *Their vision:* “Our vision is to rescue millions, protect half a billion and make justice unstoppable.” Isn’t that wonderful!

Gary Haugen is the president of IJM, and Gary is a joy-filled Jesus guy. If you meet him, he’s joyful. When you listen to him speak, he’s joyful. He was asked once, how can you be so joyful, with what you do and with the evil you witness every day? His reply: How can I *not* be? If I don’t have joy, I’m useless; I’m no good to anyone. Here is what he has said about this (from a journal he contributed to):

“The victims of injustice in our world do not need our spasm of passion; they need our long obedience in the same direction. *They* need our legs and lungs of endurance; and *we* need sturdy stores of joy. We cannot ache and sweat through history’s long arc of justice without clutching life-giving stores of beauty, laughter, goodness, love and light; without snatching delicious naps in the cool grassy spots, and without late night fires with friends who make us flush and ache with laughter. To carelessly ditch the cool canteen of joy in the name of a severe urgency is to misunderstand the expedition and to render one’s self useless in the fight against aggressive evil. The grim, sophisticated, self-serious activist finds him/herself angry and spent and exceedingly bad company. For while it is heartless and lazy to pretend that the suffering, slaughter and waste of our world is not real and true, it is indulgent and false to believe it is the whole truth, in this world or the next—for it is not. To lose this faith is to lose sight of what makes evil

evil and our fight worth fighting. Moreover, as wizened and weathered veterans have observed, nearly once every day the divine struggle for justice should make us laugh. For the juxtaposition of the grandness and glory of the calling with the quality of his recruits is sure evidence of a comic heart within the Sovereign.”

Now there is a guy who has chosen joy in the midst of hard, if not evil, circumstances. In a line of work that includes raids in places like Nigeria and Boko Haram who kidnap and enslave girls.

I love what he’s saying: if we don’t have joy, we’re no good to anybody. We need to be able to laugh and restore our souls.

And this is why Jesus says, in John 15, as he is summarizing all of his ministry with his disciples on the evening of the last supper, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” He’s saying that an essential part of discipleship all along was for them to have joy in all things.

And we need joy to engage the challenges we will face in following the Way of Jesus in today’s world.

If you’re still pondering what your hopes and dreams or goals are for 2024, and you happen to think about your discipleship and want to renew your call in following Jesus, here are two things that can help along the way:

What does it look like for me to be me in that calling? With my background, all of my personality strengths and quirks, my skills and available time and energy? We are not called to be someone else. We're called to be ourselves, so how can we hear, in a fresh way, Jesus calling me, here and now?

And then, how I can I find and practice joy in what I do? Where can I find those moments to laugh with others, and play and sing and be renewed and refreshed in spirit? Not to escape everything or put our head in the sand, but to stay strong for the long haul.

We're going to sing a new song, "From the nets of our labor..."