

1/21/24 Mark 1:14-20 ( 3rd Sunday after Epiphany)  
Delivered at St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, Hamilton  
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In the Name of the One Holy and Living God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Just imagine for a moment you are sitting at your computer, attending a zoom meeting and the CEO who is new to your company and someone you haven't had a chance to get to know, unexpectedly interrupts the meeting, asks you to leave your current job and follow him to a new, unfamiliar city and assume a completely different position. Or envision you are in the middle of giving a lecture to a roomful of freshman at the local college and the new president who just came on board, comes into the lecture hall, asks you to stop teaching, leave behind your occupation as a college professor and accept a new, entirely different vocation. How about the new conductor of your local orchestra at your first rehearsal, asking that you put down your instruments, leave them behind and begin to learn a whole new way to make music. Who would do this?

We can only imagine what that must have been like for the disciples when Jesus appeared before them and asked them to leave everything that was familiar behind and follow him. We learn from Mark's gospel that Jesus is asking Simon and his brother Andrew and also, James and his brother John, who were all fishermen, to not only leave their livelihoods, but to leave their families and communities to follow him. In ancient times, allegiance to family ties were strong. You remained in your village, and with your community. Sons usually held the same occupation as their fathers did and their fathers before them, going back for generations. Mark tells us, that James and John get up out of the boat to follow Jesus and left their poor father sitting there, with probably a very dazed look on his face! There is a great sense of urgency disciples were responding to. They knew they had to leave.

Jesus says to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people. And immediately they left their nets and followed him." There was something about this man they knew so little about, that captivated them and compelled the disciples, to answer his call. Jesus's time had come. He was on the move! His earthy ministry was beginning and he was calling his disciples together. He was building the Kingdom of God, his community of followers, to bring the good news to others. What is so interesting here is the disciples knew very little about Jesus or the power he held. They had not yet witnessed any of his acts of healing or miracles that would reveal his divine nature. But they still chose to literally drop what they were doing, leave the safety and security of their current lives behind to follow him. What an amazing trust and faith the disciples had! I wonder how we would even begin to describe this kind of faith that made it possible for the disciples to do this? Are we able to embody that same trust and faith in a future that is unknown and uncertain? Jesus was calling the disciples into a new way of being, asking them to follow him for a lifetime. For some of us, this emboldened trust may be hard to wrap our minds around. I know it is for me! It seems that Jesus had an

extraordinarily, commanding presence. I believe that he is asking this of us as well, to make that same commitment, to follow him for a lifetime.

This scripture passage reminds me of the time back in 2015, when I was employed by the Sisters of St. Francis, as a member of their congregational staff. I was tasked with planning for the care needs of the elder, retired sisters. This Franciscan Order is mission focused with many sisters working with poor, underserved and marginalized populations in many parts of the world. During the course of my employment with them, I learned that among the vows they took when they entered the order, the sisters' vow of obedience was the most striking and the one that intrigued me the most. The sisters told me they learned never to become attached to any one place. They never knew when or where they would be sent to serve next. They didn't question this life of service. The sisters lived simple, modest lives, acquiring few possessions and attachments. When it was time to move on to their next ministry, they would be ready to answer the call. Their faith was deeply ingrained and they lived with great intentionality and purpose. They trusted God with their lives and with their future. I stood in such awe at the obedience to their vows and their acceptance of wherever God was calling them next. Some sisters told me they were asked to change their ministries and locations every year.

So how do we follow Jesus? Our answers to this question I suspect, would be as different and varied as each of us here today. That's what makes this all so spectacular! Jesus called ordinary men, living ordinary lives, people just like us, to be his disciples. They didn't need to submit a resume or schedule a job interview. He accepted them just as they were. All the disciples needed was to put their faith and trust in the Holy One that had been prophesied to come, who would proclaim the good news and change the world as they knew it, forever.

Just recently, I was approaching a stop light at a busy intersection in the city of Syracuse, and spotted a woman standing there, holding up a sign asking for help. It was a cold, blustery day and her face was partially obscured by the oversized hood on her jacket. To be very honest, I usually approach this familiar and frequent scenario with a great deal of ambivalence, never knowing quite what to do. Most times, which I am embarrassed to admit, I would hope the light remained green or at least turned yellow, so I didn't have to stop. Because if I stopped, then I needed to face that person, who I have conveniently kept invisible, by just passing them by.

Somewhere in my reading, I remember coming across an author who talks about connecting with others, especially strangers by looking into their eyes. As we have often heard it said, our eyes are the window into our souls. On this particular day, at this particular busy intersection, the light turned red. The woman standing right outside my car window, continued to look down at the street, something I am quite sure she had a great deal of practice doing. Surrendering in that moment, I reached into my center console, rummaged around for some loose bills, rolled down my window and held my hand out toward her.

She approached me and our eyes met as she accepted the money. In that magnificent and indescribable moment of grace, she was no longer invisible. She was a child of God just like you and I, worthy of recognition, acceptance, compassion and love. As the light turned green, she said to me, "God bless you" and I drove off. I just drove off. Quite suddenly and unexpectedly, my eyes filled with tears and I was completely overcome with emotion. Why had it taken me so long to recognize Christ in the faces of all those people that I had passed by so many times, unable to recognize their humanity?

So, I did find the words I was looking for from that author I mentioned earlier. She is a favorite of mine. Her name is Anne Lamott, and she wrote a book entitled, *Hallelujah Anyway*, which is about rediscovering mercy. She says that "we need to pay attention, listen and open our hearts. Everything slows down when we listen and stop trying to fix the unfixable. We end up looking into other people's eyes, and see the desperation, or let them see ours. This connection slips past the armor like water past stones. Being slow and softened, even for a few minutes or seconds, gives sneaky grace the chance to enter." Such beautiful imagery!

A renowned American poet, the late Mary Oliver, "Asks us, what is our plan to do with our one, wild and precious life?" Mark tells us the disciples chose to leave their old lives behind and to follow Jesus, with the promise and assurance of believing in the good news. The disciples had the courage to believe in what they could not see was waiting for them and the strength to let go of their fear. The invitation before us then, is to consider what we, might need to let go of and leave behind, to do the same. Amen