

“CALL TO ADVENTURE”

Matthew 4:12-33 January 22nd, 2017

In her book It's News to Me: Messages of Hope for Those Who Haven't Heard, the author Linda Schiphorst McCoy tells this story about Answering the Call, today's theme in our Scripture reading.

A few years ago, I was on a retreat in northern Michigan, and I knew that some of our friends from home were sailing in the vicinity. One evening I went to the local boat dock, and walked through the lines of boats calling out the names of our friends, hopeful that they might be there. I remember the joy I felt when I yelled their names, and they answered! They were actually there, and they responded to my call!!

However, there are times when we get a call that we don't hear, or don't want to hear. It might be a matter of thinking, “My plate is already full. Call back tomorrow.” There are times that we don't even answer the call, especially if we don't know who's calling. That's true these days with “Caller ID” that can be put on our phones, identifying the person who's placing the call to us. Sometimes we don't answer the call because we're not home, or because we don't hear the call come in. There are a variety of reasons that many of us don't answer a call when it comes to us.

That's part of what makes the Bible passage for today so remarkable. Now, granted, we're not talking about a phone call from an unknown source; we're talking about a face-to-face encounter. But this story of Jesus calling his first group of followers is something worthy of our attention.

Let's think about that part of the Bible passage for a bit. Here we have four guys: two sets of brothers, doing what they normally did-fishing in the Sea of

Galilee. Now, who knows? Maybe they didn't really enjoy what they were doing. Perhaps they were fishing because that's just what you did for a living when you lived in the region. Maybe they did it because that's what their family decided was in their future. Or maybe they did it because they genuinely enjoyed the outdoors and the challenge of bringing in a load of fish each day.

We don't know for sure why they were doing what they were doing and we don't know how they felt about it. We only know that they were doing their normal, ordinary, everyday routine, when Jesus came along and called to them. He invited them to come with him, to leave what they were doing, to leave the people they knew and loved, and to embark on a new endeavor. They answered that call. They left what they had always done, and went with him.

Now I doubt very seriously that this was the first time they had ever encountered the man Jesus. We read earlier in the Bible passage that Jesus had begun his teaching and preaching in the area, and they might have heard him during one of those sessions. It's also possible that they had been a part of the group that was hanging around John the Baptist, and they may have encountered Jesus there. The interesting thing is that when Jesus called to them, they were ready and willing to answer the call. They answered with a loud, emphatic and unequivocal "YES!"

That causes me to consider what we would have done in similar circumstances. Just suppose that you and I were at the office or in the store, minding our own business, and doing what we did every single day. Just imagine that someone we've heard speak, someone we know a little about, and someone we even find a bit intriguing, comes into the place where we're working, and makes us an offer. The person extends the invitation to come and work with this new endeavor. What would you do? Would you drop everything, and go? Or would you be more

likely to say, “Hey, I’ve got my pension to consider. The kids have college ahead, and the mortgage has to be paid. I’d better stay where I am”?

I believe that’s the question and the challenge for each one of us to consider, because I’m convinced that God calls to us today just as much as in times gone by. I don’t believe for a minute that God only called the likes of Abraham and Moses, or that Jesus only called those twelve disciples thousands of years ago, and stopped. I think God is calling you and me today and wants us to get a sense of who we’re called to be. I really believe that a lot of the confusion we feel would resolve itself if we could hear and respond to God’s call to us, so how do we do that? How does God call you and me? How do we respond to that call?

We can encounter God in a variety of ways. Sometimes, for example, we experience God’s call through our passions and interests. God calls us by way of the things that fascinate and interest us. What is that for you? What is it that captivates you and gets your attention? I think it’s important to pay attention to whatever that is, for within it may lie God’s call for us.

I also believe we can receive God’s call through some of the very ordinary experiences of our everyday life, just as those fishermen along the Sea of Galilee did. We need to be alert enough to look for what’s around us, and see the opportunities. What is it for you? What’s happening in your life right now? What has been going on? What little seed has been planted in you that you might want to notice and be aware of? Where might God be in the midst of it? I think it’s important to be aware of what’s going on around us in the normal, everyday flow of things. You never know which experience may be God’s call to us. Personally, I have stopped believing in coincidences and now

I look for the miracles God is working in my life.

There's another way in which God's call can be clear to us, and that's through people. There are people in all our lives who encourage us and affirm us—people who recognize gifts and abilities that we can't see for ourselves. There are people who challenge us to move into new territory and try new things. We need other people to help us grow, and we can help them grow, too.

We all need someone around us who really represents God. There was a person like that for me, a clergy friend who nudged and nurtured me along the way until I finally said “Yes!” to my call to ministry—even though I didn't fully understand why He would call me. I had ignored it or joked about it for so long because I felt unworthy of being his servant in that way. Who is it for you? Who is the person who encourages you to dream dreams? Who helps you be more than you ever thought you could be? All of us might want to pay close attention to who that is, because that person just might be God's calling to us.

One thing for sure, God does call us, and that call evokes an answer from us. We have the option of saying “No,” and turning the other way, and I suspect we do that sometimes. We can back-peddle and beg off and make excuses by saying, “This isn't the right time.” “We can't afford it.” “I don't have the right education; I'm too young; I'm too old; I'm not smart enough.” It doesn't matter what it is, we can always find a reason not to respond to God.

However, I don't think that's what God wants for us. Rather, God's call is really an invitation to embark on a journey of self-discovery. To know God's call is to begin to know ourselves, to know who we are at the center of our being. We begin to discover the interests and skills and abilities God has given us, and the gifts and passions God calls forth from us. It is in knowing

ourselves that we come to know the God within us, and God's call on our lives.

It doesn't stop with knowing who we are. It means being that person, being who God created us to be, our very best selves, being true to ourselves, and using the gifts and talents God has given us. That's really God's call to us—to know who we're created to be, and to be the spiritual being God has designed us to be. God calls us to be ourselves, fully and completely the self we were created to be. All of life is the journey to discover who we are.

Recently I read the story of Scott, a young man called to the mission field. It was told by Rev. Dr. Dawn Chesser and it is a powerful story about answering your call to be all that God knows you can be. She writes:

In my first appointment, I met an extraordinary young man named Scott. Scott was away at college when I first went to the church, and so I didn't meet him until he came home for summer break. Scott was a student at a conservative Christian college. When I first met him, he described himself as an evangelical. He was on fire to spread the gospel. He had been very involved in the youth group in high school and had become active in collegiate ministry at his school.

During his senior year, Scott began to feel strongly that God was calling him to the mission field. He came to talk to me about possibilities for service through The United Methodist Church. I shared with him what I knew about United Methodist programs and gave him website information.

After Scott graduated, he returned home and he and his sister began attending a class I taught on Wednesday mornings. In the class, we read and discussed books on Christian history and theology, biblical studies, and other topics of interest to the members. During the time when Scott and his sister came, I believe we were studying work from the Westar Institute: Marcus Borg, Stephen

Patterson, Dominic Crossan, and others. Scott was intrigued by these thinkers, although he often found himself in strong disagreement not only with the authors, but with members of the class.

In the meantime, Scott continued to investigate potential mission programs. I was very surprised when he decided to serve through a Mennonite team that was known for their radical actions and their service in some of the world's most dangerous war zones. Scott went through training and was soon reporting back from his post in Chiapas, Mexico, where he and other team members were serving as international witnesses to atrocities being committed against indigenous people by paramilitary groups. I kept in touch with Scott, and our study group prayed for him. We were all amazed as he became fluent in Spanish, even as he became fluent in issues of injustice and oppression that most of us have never even heard about. The next year, I flew down to visit him and learn more about the work his organization was doing so I could share his work with his home church more succinctly.

Scott continued to serve in Mexico for several years. Then 9/11 happened. As the drumbeat for war in Iraq increased, Scott's organization began making plans to serve as witnesses in the emerging war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan. Even though we knew it was a possibility, I don't think any of us were really prepared when Scott announced that he would be leaving for Baghdad so that he and others could be in place when the United States and our allies began making airstrikes in 2002.

I prayed and worried about Scott as I watched the twenty-four-hour coverage of the bombing of Iraq. I knew he was there, sitting alongside Christians who had lived in that city for many generations, joining in their suffering and putting his own life at risk to provide a witness. I am grateful that Scott survived the many

weeks and months of bombing, and eventually was able to make his way out of Iraq, by way of Jordan, although the story of his escape is incredible in and of itself.

After Iraq, Scott went to Arizona to work along the border with Mexico for a number of years. Then he went to seminary. He did not pursue ordination, but instead continues to work as an advocate for the poorest among us in a major city in the United States. He has married a woman he met while serving in the mission field. They have settled down to a more normal life and are raising a son together, but these two people are a different sort of Christians than I have ever been.

When I read this story about these four men—Simon, Andrew, James, and John—and others, men and women alike, who left their jobs and homes and families to become disciples of Jesus Christ, I am reminded of my friend Scott and the sacrifices he made to answer God’s call on his life.

While Scott’s story is certainly dramatic and unique, as are the stories of the fisherman, all of our stories of answering Jesus’ call to “follow me and I will make you fishers of people” are equally important. We are present here today, whether we are sitting in the pews or up here at the pulpit, because we have heard the call to serve God by serving others. Perhaps our greatest service as disciples comes not from big and dramatic things, but from the small acts of kindness and compassion and the one-to-one acts of justice that we practice every day.

Jesus’ call to “follow me” is for each one of us, and he calls us to answer that call in the specific context in which we have been placed. We don’t have to go to a war zone to follow Jesus. We don’t have to go to another country, or another city, or even another neighborhood. As our parents might have told us, all we have to do is hoe our own row. We have to tend the garden in which God has planted us. We have to nurture the people God has placed in our community.

We don't have to try to do it all! We just have to concentrate on our row. But just think: If each one of us hoes our row, imagine how that can change the world!

Jesus calls some of us to the adventure of serving in the mission field in a foreign land. Others are called to adventure closer to home, serving God's people through service organizations and schools, through foodservice and legal assistance, through offering prayer and healing. There are so many ways for God's people to follow Jesus into the adventure of serving.

Where do you hear God calling you to join Jesus in the adventure of being his disciple? What row is yours to hoe? What need in your church, your community, or in the wider world, cries out to your heart? How can you respond?

The good news is that Jesus came to bring salvation to all people, no matter who they are, no matter where they live, and no matter what kind of life they have led. He came especially for those who struggle in this world: for minorities, women and children; for those who have known trouble and are paying their debt to society in prison; for those who find themselves struggling to make it through the day because of sickness, or addiction, or depression, or disability, or mental illness. He came for those whom the culture has judged negatively or sought to hold back or oppress. He came for those who will never even have a chance to learn about him. He came for all people, for all of God's children, all across this world. He came for you, and he came for me, and he invites each one of us, no matter who we are or what we've done in this life, to join him in the work of discipleship, to join him in the work of transforming the world.

Answer the call from Jesus to "Follow me!" Take that step to join in the adventure of serving in the name of Jesus! All we have to do is answer the call in the way outlined by Jesus' own practices in the final verse, where he models discipleship for us: Go throughout your community, teaching in many different contexts, proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ through your words and your actions, and attending to every disease and sickness among God's people! Amen.