

Home By Another Way: Called

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 4:12-22
on January 22, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

In the comic strip, Linus had gotten fed up with Lucy. She was up to her self-focused ways again, and he was over it. “You never ask me what I think about something,” Linus reprimands Lucy, “or what I believe, or what I know, or where I’m going, or where I’ve been, or anything!” In a huff, Linus walks away, leaving Lucy speechless. He couldn’t resist one final barb: “If you’re going to show interest in other people, you have to ask questions!”¹

II.

I have questions on my mind today, and not just because I like asking them! (Oh the number of times I have to tell my spouse, “I’m not *questioning* you, I’m just asking questions!”) I’m sure I’m not alone in finding as much meaning and learning and understanding in the questions as in the answers. Yet every time I reflect on this story that Sheree read for us today of Jesus’s calling of the disciples, I can’t help but to question: “**where are the questions?!**”

Did you notice that too? In this beautiful calling story from Matthew, we have a stunning lack of queries. To the four disciples mentioned here – Simon Peter, Andrew, James the son of Zebedee, and John – Jesus says, “follow me,” with nary a wondering in sight. No, “are you ready for this? Do you want me to call you?” No, “Do you know what you’re getting yourself into? Are you sure you want to say yes?” No, “Do you have what it takes? Are you in, or are you out?”

¹ As quoted by Jill Crainshaw in *Keep the Call: Leading the Congregation Without Losing Your Soul*, p70.

And, just as bewildering, they answer without a question in sight. “Immediately they dropped their nets,” Matthew tells us. “Immediately they left the boats.” From the disciples, there’s no, “um, who are you? And why are you talking to me?” No, “where exactly are we following you to? And how are we going to get there?” No, “are you sure you’re asking the right person? Are you sure I can do this?” One right after the other – Simon Peter, Andrew, James the son of Zebedee, and John – immediately, without seemingly a second of hesitation.

No questions here. Rather – it’s a story of call and response. A call and response in which there is no need for a question to interrupt or illuminate, explain or encourage. We don’t know how the other disciples would be called – none of the gospel writers tell us this – but we could assume that it was an experience akin to these four. All the elements were here – four men found in their work, with their family nearby, summoned in the fierce urgency of now. Which is to suggest: Jesus calls in the midst of our daily lives, rearranging its ordinary pieces of trade and tribe with a mission that cannot be ignored or interrogated. “Follow me,” Jesus says, “and I will make you fish for people.” “Immediately,” Matthew tells us, “they left their nets, they left their boats, and followed him.” *For the kingdom of heaven had come near.*²

III.

Perhaps it’s due to the distance between then and now, or perhaps it’s a feature of our modern minds, but I know I’m not the only one who reads this text and feels the questions and the inadequacies start to rise to the surface. How could he have known that these were the right men for the job? And how could they have done this – just leave everything and go with Jesus –

² Thanks to Tom Long’s fine exegesis in *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*, p43.

without seeming concern for Papa Zebedee, or dinner that night, or the people who relied on their work, or all the dreams and plans they already had for their lives? Perhaps these questions reveal more about me than about Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Perhaps the real wondering is about what God's call looks and feels like to us.

For indeed, there are times when the call of God redirects us radically away from where we've been: the "sell everything you have," burn-the-ships kinds of moments that utterly reorient our very lives. You know those times: quitting your job to start something brand new, leaving an abusive relationship, moving to a wholly new place, or taking on a new role so different from any we've known before.

But perhaps more often than not, the call of God meets us at the familiar, exhausted end of our rope. We've done all we've known to do. We've given our best and then some. We've labored and adapted and trained and studied and listened and tried, day after day, only to come up empty-handed with seemingly nothing to show for our efforting. And there, the call of God summons us deeper in place, not to pluck up everything we've known in frustration or prune everything around us in exhaustion, but rather to go and grow deeper even still, right where we are. Deeper into our knowing, deeper into our contexts, deeper into our relationships, deeper into what we've long known but haven't yet discovered in full. *Fish for people, not for fish. Reach towards God's dream for the world, not just my plan for my life.* And you know, it's in that place – not far from all we've known, but surrounded by familiarity, muscles and minds still aching from before – that we are transformed.

IV.

So in the spirit of wondering aloud about what's not in the text but perhaps implied or even lived in our lives, I want to sit with four questions about calling that I know I have asked and felt, and in listening carefully to you, I know you have too. And on this day when we ordain and commission our Deacons to serve, I wonder if we all could be sustained by some time in the call questions.

Question 1: What if Jesus' call comes before I'm ready?

Just like the young child who said, "mom, I want to be baptized, but not yet," perhaps you'll want to say to Jesus, "Jesus, I want to be called, but not yet." I'm not quite ready to relinquish all that I'm carrying or drop my nets just yet.

To which I wonder: *what do you think must fall into place before you are ready?*

Question 2: Do I have to give up everything to follow Jesus? (I mean, I really like my TV.)

Can you imagine the holy sound of nets dropping out of hands and falling onto the sand? Or the sound of splashing water as grown men abandoned their boats and paddled to shore? Holy, right? But does it make me less faithful to admit that such a summons would be hard for me?

To which I wonder: *could the very things to which you most tightly cling – your job, your identity, your sense of being right, your power, your paycheck, your ambition, your comfort – could that be precisely what Jesus is inviting you to reconsider?*

Question 3: How do I know what I'm hearing is God's call and not my own ego or wants?

Last week after our worship service about temptation, one of you said to me: “pastor, I may have missed this in your sermon, but I didn’t hear you say how we know if a temptation is a temptation or not. Like – let’s say I’m offered a new job with a bigger salary and greater flexibility. Is that a temptation? Or not?”

“You’re right, friend,” I responded. “You didn’t hear me answer that!”

In much the same way, we might question: “how do I know if this nudge I’m feeling is God’s call? What if it’s just my ego trying to do something good in the world to make me feel better? I feel like people seem so certain when they say things like, “God wanted me to take this next step,” or “God called me to this new place.” Or perhaps that wondering is tinged with grief. “I used to hear God’s voice so clearly when I was younger,” we lament. “Why do I feel so uncertain now? Does that mean God’s not actually calling? Have I missed it altogether?”

To which I wonder: *In the same way that the trusted voices around us help us to see our blind spots, could it be that we need those trusted voices around us to help us hear our calling too?*

Finally: What does the call to follow even look like?

An old Hasidic Jewish story goes something like this:

Rabbi Zusya grew to a very old age, and as the light of his earthly life began to dim, he said to a friend: “in the coming world, they will not ask me: *Why were you not Moses?* They will ask me: *Why were you not Zusya?*”³

When we ask: “shouldn’t my call look like my dad’s or my sister’s? Shouldn’t my call be uncomfortable and thick with meaning and bigger than anything I’ve ever known?”

³ As told by Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, p11.

To which I wonder: *what brings the good news to life for you?*

V.

Parker Palmer describes vocation – or what some might call ‘calling’ – “not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.”⁴ He continues: “we do not find our callings by conforming ourselves to some abstract moral code. We find our callings by claiming authentic selfhood, by being who we are, by dwelling in the world as *Zusya* rather than straining to be *Moses*. The deepest vocational question is not ‘what ought I to do with my life?’ It is the more elemental and demanding, ‘who am I? What is my nature?’⁵

Friends, as Linus says, questions can lead us to greater knowing of God and ourselves. But perhaps when the questions fall short, the essence of calling remains. Perhaps when we let ourselves be seen and heard and loved so fully by God in Christ, our peace will come. Perhaps it really can be as simple as stepping forward in faith when Jesus’ summons us to follow. Perhaps our questions can give way to wonder, our queries quieting into song:

I have decided to follow Jesus.

I have decided to follow Jesus.

I have decided to follow Jesus.

No turning back, no turning back.

⁴ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, p10.

⁵ *Ibid*, p15.