

January 26, 2020

'How Far Will YOU Follow?'
(*Matthew 4:12-23*)

Rev. Jane Courtright

Now here is this man mending his nets
after a long day, his fingers,
nicked here and there by ropes and hooks...
pain like tomorrow in the small of his back.

Stinking of baits...his mind on a pint and supper.
Nothing else.
A man who describes the settled shape of his life
every time his hands make and snug a perfect knot.

I want to understand if only for the story,
how a man like this, a man like my father in harvest,
like Buck McVane in a stench of lobstering,
or a teamster, a steel worker,
how an ordinary working stiff,
even a high tempered one could just be called away!

If they had been vagrants, poets or minstrels,
I'd understand that,
men who would follow a different dog.
But how would a man whose movement
day after day after day
Absolutely trust the shape it fills –
put everything down and walk away??

This poem, given to me by a friend,
expresses my wonder also at this gospel story.

Two separate times, Jesus saw a man and his brother
casting their nets into the sea,
and he said, "Follow me," and they FOLLOWED HIM.
It was just as simple and as uncomplicated as that.

I don't know how you feel about it, BUT TO ME,
this SIMPLICITY sounds a little improbable!
Why would these two people make such AN IMPORTANT DECISION
on the basis of what SEEMS like VERY LIMITED REASON?!

But if it does seem improbable, then we forget that this IS the way
that people ALMOST ALWAYS make their overwhelming life decisions.
If you're like me, it is the comparatively minor decisions
that take all the time and fuss and energy.

DECISIONS LIKE:

*Where and when will we take our vacation this year?

*Which lunch or dinner to order from the restaurant menu?

*Which college to attend? *What to wear to the party?

Often, we don't go one way or another on decisions like these
until we've taken plenty of time to weigh all the pros and cons,
then we ask our family and friends what they think,
maybe even toss a coin!

Then, STILL UNSURE, we decide, and always wonder
how it would have all turned out
IF we had made the different choice!

But, on the really crucial decisions of life: DECISIONS LIKE:

*Do I love this person ENOUGH to spend the rest of my life with him or her?

*Is it worth DYING for?

*Can I COMMIT myself to this CAUSE?

When it comes to decisions like THESE,

it's not just the PROS AND CONS listing part of me or you,
or the COIN TOSSING & ADVICE SEEKING part that are involved.

It is ALL of us: HEART....MIND...WILL.

and when the MOMENT comes and we find ourselves
MOVING OUT for good and all, one way or another,
there is a RELENTLESS SPONTANEITY about it –
a kind of TERRIFIC sense of CONVICTION!

So, if you are SIMON or ANDREW or JAMES OR JOHN, YOU STEP OUT
And start following the way that you have chosen;
NOT that way OVER THERE or that way RIGHT HERE, but THIS WAY!
Of all the million and one ways in the world,
YOU CHOOSE THIS WAY.
(or maybe it chooses you.)

And if the choice is the right one (whatever THAT means exactly!),
You get the feeling NOT that you acted on BLIND IMPULSE -with NO preparation;
But that this is THE MOMENT, THE CRISIS that SOMEHOW
you have been preparing for your WHOLE LIFE.

Jesus' call to 'Follow me' to his first disciples & to you and me –
Is an INVITATION that asks us to make ONE of overwhelming life decisions:
The decision to be a Christian.
And this IS a decision for which life prepares us!

Like those first disciples may that invitation to be a Christian
Isn't really as abrupt and startling as it first appears.

*Some people go to Sunday School or church for many years

OR

*They listen to the words of a teacher
or are influenced by family or friends.

OR

*They read books or watch films that inspire them.

OFTEN

*People see Jesus in the EYES, ACTIONS
or the SPOKEN OR WRITTEN WORDS of other people.

NO, Jesus' CALL or INVITATION
is probably NOT the first encounter we have with him!

And, more than likely, it was LIKE THIS for those FIRST disciples as well!
Although in our gospel reading for today,
there is no indication that Jesus and the disciples knew each other,
the GOSPEL OF JOHN does explain
that John the Baptizer has POINTED Jesus out as the MESSIAH
to Andrew and Simon earlier.

We are not to think that on THIS DAY,
Jesus stood before those disciples for the first time!
NO DOUBT, they had stood in the crowds around Jesus & listened to him talk.
NO DOUBT, they had ALREADY felt the charisma and love in his eyes and actions.
THEY HAD ALREADY EXPERIENCED HIS PRESENCE!
They followed him NOT BECAUSE of what he SAID so much,
but because of everything that Jesus was.

It's often like that for you and me.
We experience Jesus in many ways...until there comes a time
when all those experiences COME TOGETHER
into a special constellation that SUDDENLY, WE SEE!

It's like studying the NIGHT SKY with a practiced STARGAZER.

Lying on the grass, you look up at the sky, in the direction your teacher points.
AT FIRST, you see only a blur of INDIVIDUAL STARS.

THEN...

You turn your head, you squint, but still see NOTHING.

And then, finally, SUDDENLY,
The shape of Orion or the Big Dipper jumps out at you!

In the same way,
once having turned around and glimpsed the Realm of God,
the essence of the message of Jesus, **our lives are changed forever.**
In the moment we least expect it,
the **SHAPE** of the Realm (*or what is possible with God*) is suddenly **VISIBLE.**
We can never again look at the world without seeing it!

And God will go to **GREAT LENGTHS**
to help us see the *shape* of the Realm.
Once it happens, once we **SEE** it,
THEN we **MUST** make a decision and **ACT.**

Whether or not to be a Christian
is something each one of us must decide for ourselves.
But once we've seen the shape, we have CAUGHT THE BALL!

Sometimes at Little League games (or church softball leagues)
we see a player catch the ball.
She or he **OBVIOUSLY** does NOT know ***what to do with it,***
and just stands in the field, PARALYZED.
The result is a lost or stumbled over ball,
and the crowd may roar, "**MAKE UP YOUR MIND!**"

We also have to make up our minds to **FOLLOW** JESUS.

And a follower of Jesus is not somebody who has ALREADY ARRIVED,
and can now settle down and relax.

A follower is somebody who is, quite literally,
'ON THE WAY'...the name of the early Christian movement.

Author Robert Fulghum remembers a class he attended
At the Institute for Reconciliation, taught by a Dr. Papaderos.
When Dr. Papaderos invited some final questions on the LAST DAY of class,
Fulghum jokingly asked him, "So, what IS the meaning of life?"
The answer sure surprised him!

Pulling out a small piece of MIRROR he had found as a small boy,
Dr. Papaderos told how he used TO DELIGHT
in shining its light into (as he put it:)
"Dark places where the sun would NEVER shine,
like deep holes & crevices & dark closets.
He said, "It became a game for me to get light into
the most INACCESSIBLE places I could find."

"I kept the mirror," Papaderos continued,
"and as I went about my growing up,
I would take it out in idle moments
& continue the challenge of the game."

As I became an adult, I came to understand
that this WAS NOT just a child's game,
but a METAPHOR for what I might do WITH MY LIFE!

"I came to understand that I AM NOT THE LIGHT,
or even the source of the light.
LIGHT, TRUTH, UNDERSTANDING, KNOWLEDGE, is there,
And will only **SHINE in DARK PLACES** AS I reflect it."

“I am a fragment of A MIRROR whose **WHOLE DESIGN & SHAPE** I don’t know.
Nevertheless, with WHAT I HAVE
I can reflect light into the **DARK PLACES** of this world,
Into the **BLACK PLACES** in the hearts of people.
And change **SOME THINGS in SOME PEOPLE.**

And maybe, others may **SEE AND DO LIKEWISE.**
This is what I am about.
THIS IS THE MEANING OF MY LIFE.”

As followers of Jesus,
you & I are **NOT THE LIGHT**, or even **THE SOURCE OF THE LIGHT.**
But we **CAN** shine God’s truth while on **OUR WAY.**

AND SUCH is the **POWER OF GOD**
That through **US,**
Others may be **INVITED** or **CALLED** to do the same!
Amen.