

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
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Year A, RCL

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Jesus saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The four fisherman had seen him before. He had moved to town from the village of Nazareth a few weeks earlier. They had seen him on the Sabbath in synagogue. They had seen him in the local tavern. He had the hands of a carpenter, the brains of a rabbi, and the eyes of a, well what? Sometimes the eyes had the softness of a lover, at other times the distance and fire of a prophet. He seemed both very ordinary and yet bigger than life. It was as if his comfort with himself was so strong it made him larger. He took an interest in the fisherman's catch or the farmer's sowing, and yet he would also see things that others found invisible. "Look!" he'd say. "The Kingdom of God has come near. It's almost here. We've got to get ready. We can't just go on about our business. There's special work to do!"

Today they see him walking along the shore toward them while they are working. "Hey there! Simon, Andrew, James, and John," he called to them. "Follow me, and you will be catching people instead of fish."

Today that same call comes to us. "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of persons." Jesus calls us. The Greek word for Church is "ecclesia"; it means "called out". We are called out by God, separated from everyone else. We are set apart to be a holy people, different from others. So the first aspect of being the Church is exclusivity, being in the Church is different from not being in it. Being a Christian is different from not being a Christian. As with Abraham, we are called out to be a blessing for everyone else.

Jesus called them. I want to speak to you this morning about call or vocation. There are many powerful stories in the Bible of individuals receiving special calls to particularly ministries. God called to Moses out of the burning bush. God called to the boy Samuel in the middle of the night four times before he responded. God called Jeremiah when he was still a youth. So too now Jesus calls these four fisherman, Simon and Andrew, James and John. These are the first four disciples according to the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These stories are stories of particular vocations, that is, stories in which God calls a particular individual to a particular work.

There is also what is called a general vocation. This is the vocation of the whole people of God. In the Old Testament, God says to the children of Abraham, You will be my people and I will be your god. You will be a kingdom of priests, a holy people. That means that the whole collective, the whole community and each individual in it has a vocation to be set apart for God's purposes, to intercede for the world, to proclaim God's love and goodness to the world. To reconnect the world to God.

In the New Testament a great secret is revealed, and we celebrate this revelation of the secret in Epiphany. It is that the Gentiles are also called to be part of this holy nation, this royal priesthood. Every one of us is called to be part of the Children of Abraham who are called to be a blessing for everyone else. Every one of us in this room is called to the priestly work of intercession and sacrifice on behalf of the whole world and the prophetic work of announcing God's purposes and love to the whole world.

I believe that God calls every one of us in both of these ways. By virtue of being baptized into the Church, each one of us is called to participate in the general vocation of the Church to be Christ's physical presence in the particular time and place in which we find ourselves. Each of us

in this room is called to be a community that together carries out the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in Litchfield, Connecticut, in 2017. We are called to live and proclaim the transforming love of God and to invite others to join us.

Each of us is also called, has been called, or will be called to a particular vocation. Some of us may be very clear that we heard such a call and are trying to follow it. Others of us may feel that we have been led by circumstances and ordinary choices to the vocation that God has prepared for us. Others of us may feel that we have not yet heard our particular call and are wondering when and how it may come. Some of us may have felt that we have been called to different things at different times. All of these are forms of particular vocations.

How does one know when one has been called? How can one tell that it is God who is calling and not just my own ambition, desire, or fear? How do know that it is Jesus and not the voice of Society, of parents, or other authorities and powers?

First, the call comes in some way from outside. One has the sense that the voice even when it is a voice only in my mind, is not my own. It is other. There is something alien about it. For God is other. If we are to follow Jesus he needs to be in front and that implies and necessitates a certain separation. One cannot follow oneself.

Second, it tends to come while we are doing something else. Moses was taking care of his sheep and then turned aside to see a curiosity. Samuel was sleeping. The fishermen were fishing, the tax collector was in his office. Often the call comes through other people or very ordinary events. My call to follow Jesus started with someone on a train inviting me to come to special kind of church. I was just going home from school. I just heard a story of someone who was doing his homework when the words he was reading became the voice of God.

Third, when God calls us to come to him, when Jesus calls us to follow him, we are not

asked to change who we are. Our fundamental personality is retained. It is after all me, you, each of us, the person who is created, valued, and loved by God whom God calls. When the fishermen are called, Jesus is explicit that they will keep on being fishermen, they will just be doing it in a different realm. Moses the Shepherd will lead God's people like a flock. The Rabbi Saul of Tarsus will be no less a highly educated and sophisticated teacher when he is the apostle Paul. If a voice calls you to become a radically different person, beware.

That is not to say that we may not be called to change some of our behaviors. Zachaeus gave up extortion. Paul stopped persecuting. We almost certainly will be called to leave something behind, nets, boat, Father, job, career, relationship, fantasy, self-delusion, valuation by the world's standards, something.

I think in most true calls there is an excitement, a joy that overcomes the fear of loss, a new sense of freedom in the commitment, paradoxical though that may seem. Frederick Buechner says, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."¹

In more evangelical denominations, it is customary to have an altar call at every service, an opportunity for those presence to respond to God's call manifested in the preacher's message. People who wish to turn their lives over to Christ are invited to come forward and offer a prayer of dedication and self-giving. We don't do it quite that way. But we do have an altar call every week. Every week the priest asks you to come forward and to be joined to Jesus Christ by receiving his body and blood into your own body and blood. Every week as we offer up the bread and wine to God to be transformed by his Holy Spirit, we offer our own lives on the same

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p. 95

altar to be taken, blessed, broken, and then shared with the world.

Are we hearing God's call this morning? Are we listening? Will we respond when we do? The call to us will come when we least expect it. In the meantime, the call of Jesus to all of us comes loud and clear. Come to the table. Come to me all who labor and heavy laden. Come and lay your burdens down. Come and take up your cross. Come and follow me.