

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

19th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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Text: Matthew 4:18-22

Title: “Who Are You? Claim Your Vocation”

I was raised in the church. As a small child I remember the joy of vacation Bible schools, the stories in Sunday school, sitting in worship and singing the hymns with all the adults, being part of the confirmation experience, potluck suppers, Hanging of the Greens when everyone gathered together and decorated the church building. There was such joy in it. Church was just a part of growing up.

Then I remember as a youngster, thoughts began imposing themselves about becoming a preacher, a pastor. I wanted nothing to do with them, so I ignored them, thought it was just my imagination. There was no way I wanted to do that. Even as a child I felt that way.

As I grew, however, others began giving voice to those inner thoughts I was experiencing. Still, I wanted nothing to do with them. I didn't know it then but I was and am an introvert through and through. Wanted nothing to do with standing in front of people week after week and preaching. Didn't think I could do it. Didn't want to do it.

But then college came and I was enrolled in a pre-pharmacy curriculum. Took mainly science courses and was doing well, but I just felt as though something was missing. I decided to shift to mechanical engineering. More science but still something was missing.

Then I met my wife and began sharing with her the feeling of something missing as I moved through my college courses. I still remember the moment. We were in the car. I was driving and she asked, “Have you ever thought about the ministry?” That was a “light-switch question” that changed the course of my life. Hers too.

Not everyone is called to be ordained and serve in the parish. Not everyone is called to be an overseas missionary. For that matter, not everyone is called to be a doctor or nurse or teacher or engineer or electrician or ... you name it. Yet, people who claim the name Christian--someone who makes a conscious decision to follow in the ways of Jesus—well, all of us—no matter what we do for a living—all of us are called to follow him. So what does it look like to have a vocation of following him no matter what we do for a living?

Let's take a look at the call story in “The Gospel According to Matthew”. I love the call stories in the Gospels. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is strolling along the beach, looking for followers. His message is much like the Baptists: “Repent. The Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” However, his method for finding students was unusual. The usual practice meant

students sought out their teacher, not the other way around.

Jesus is different. He's out looking for people. And he happens upon a couple of fishermen: Simon and Andrew. They've already punched their time card in the clock and are in the midst of making a living. It's not recreational fishing they're doing; the kind most people in Michigan do on the weekends or over vacations. This is work. Not an option or maybe even a pleasure. It's what they have to do in order to keep the mortgage and the car loan and the health insurance paid on time. It's how they manage to save a bit for their children's college education.

Along comes Jesus: "[Hey, you two!] Come with me. I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass."
(The Message)

Jesus intrudes in these men's lives--in the middle of earning a living--and calls them to follow. Can you imagine? Some guy they don't even apparently know tells them to follow him. And without a word, they do.

It's a disturbing scene, isn't it? It has troubled Christians for a long time. How could they just apparently leave everything? A secure job, family, home. There must be more to the story, right? They must have known him before, knew he was a unique person. They had to have some foreknowledge of who he was. It's the only thing that makes sense!

Who knows? Maybe that's what happened. But either way, it's still a bit of a miracle don't you think? Even if they did know Jesus, they still chose to leave their livelihoods and their homes and follow him. Timing isn't the issue. Even familiarity is not the issue. Bottom line: they left the security of their employment in order to follow Jesus. And that, in itself, challenges us. What then does it mean for you to be called by the Christ to follow him? What does it mean for me? Where is Christ calling you to go? If we claim to be people who follow Christ, how are we following him?

Jesus continued on down the beach. Up two disciples now. Sees James and John working with their father Zebedee. They, too, are engaged in their daily routine at work. It's not backing up hard drives or checking the day's acquisitions for the plant or completing patient reports or planning the next day's schedule. Their boats were beached after the early morning fishing session on the lake. Now they were repairing the holes in their nets, a daily practice that took a couple of hours. Routine stuff. Three of them talking and working away.

Jesus comes along. Says the same thing to them: "Follow me." James and John stop what they're doing and go. Zebedee stays in the boat. It's almost like a Pied Piper story. Jesus plays his tune and Zebedee's sons can't help themselves. Sometimes I think we see them as if in a trance—with a dazed look in their eyes--simply following. It's hard to see them as real people—like us--living real lives with children to get to school, or the stresses of a job or maybe even two. It's hard to see them as people like us who worry about being in debt, or losing a job, or not finding one. It's hard to see them this way because the Gospel accounts make it look so easy. One minute they're working. Next minute they've left home and job and family, off with Jesus. We can't imagine that happening to us. We can't imagine God calling us like that. And even if God did call us like this, the chances are the answer would be, "No, I can't or won't." We'd be joining Zebedee, still sitting in the boat with his nose to the grindstone, sticking with the familiar routine, the expected life of working in order to earn a living, staying in our boat, staying home.

The reason this story can makes us anxious--when we take it seriously, the reason it can make us anxious is its clear imperative: if you want to follow Jesus, it is a vocation of leaving home, maybe not physically but leaving places of comfort. It means going places we're not sure

about. It means doing things we don't know how to do. Following Jesus is a risky venture because we aren't allowed to just stay put in our comfort zones.

Sorting through some books in my study, I came across a thin paperback: When People Pray. It's a collection of experiences people have had with prayer. I was about to put it in the "books to be given away" pile when I decided to crack it open. Turned to a page on which the name "Carol Findlay" was printed. Carol Findlay was the daughter of a couple who were members of the first full-time parish I served after graduation from seminary. She was a missionary to Korea. Carol wrote that her decision to become a missionary took eight years of praying. She had no lightning bolt experience in which God made it clear that was what she was to do.

She began, she said, by committing her life to Christ in junior high. And in high school began praying, "Lord, do you want me to be a missionary?" No clear answer came, so she enrolled in a nursing program thinking that if and when she sensed God's call, nursing would be a gift that could be used anywhere in the world. So she studied. She met several missionaries, and each of them it seemed had a special call from God. She didn't have that.

At some point in her training to be a nurse her prayer changed from, "Lord, do you want me to be a missionary?" to "Lord, do you want me to be a missionary? I haven't received any special call from You; but I am available. If you do want to use me in foreign missions, I am available."

Carol broached the subject with her parents, but their response was negative: "Why can't you stay here in Tuscola County and be a missionary? There are plenty of opportunities right here to be of service." She let the matter rest and kept an openness as she continued her studies.

She began reading about mission work and the need for medical professionals. But still no clear sign from God. The opportunity to travel as a short-term missionary to Sierre Leone became available. She decided to seek her parents' approval and they gave it. Her prayer changed yet again from "Lord, do you want me to be a missionary? I am available." to "Lord, can I be a missionary?"

Off to Africa for 6 months. The experience confirmed her suspicions. She wanted to be in the mission field. That was her call from God. So she began the lengthy application process asking God to move through the process and close the door if her desires were not in keeping with God's wishes.

When Lynn, Josh and I arrived in Caro in 1986, Carol had been in Korea for several years. It had taken eight years of boat sitting, waiting for some recognizable confirmation that she was headed in the right direction. As far as I know, she is still in Korea, following the Lord to whom she gave her life as a junior high student.

Few people, though, are so called by God. There isn't a cookie cutter model of discipleship. That's one of the great joys of following Christ: the amazing variety of ways each person is called to follow. Some of you are following Christ to the free medical clinic in Essexville. Some of you are following Christ to the Open Door soup kitchen a few times a year to feed and care for the people who come. Some of you are following Christ with your tool belts to One Week One Street. And some have left home and traveled to Rio Bravo, Mexico following Christ in ways you haven't experienced before. Some of you have followed him to the garden out back, sharing your loaves and fishes with a crowd you'll never see. Others have followed him to the prayer closet praying for people you do not know. Some of you follow him

to the classroom, going above and beyond to care for kids that are not your own. Some of you have made the effort to befriend someone new out of love for those coming to seek God. Some of you have responded to God's call to tithe as a spiritual habit that expresses your love for God and neighbor. You've crawled out of your boats and left the home of your comfort zone to serve in Christ's name.

Christ continues to call us out of our comfort zones. It doesn't matter how old we are. Anyone of any age can break away from friendship or family circles to go meet a visitor and get to know them, try to make them feel at home. Christ perpetually calls us to be free of our fears and our possessiveness in order to follow. Following Christ is risky.

Over the years I've heard Tony Campolo speak several times at various conferences. Tony is an evangelical, a sociologist and well-known Christian author. He traveled from the east coast of the US to Hawaii. And because of the time change he couldn't sleep. He describes his experience:

At 3:30 in the morning I was wandering up and down the streets of Honolulu looking for a place to get something to eat.

Up a side street I found a little place that was still open. I went in, took a seat on one of the stools at the counter, and waited to be served. This was one of those sleazy places that deserves the name, "greasy spoon." I mean I did not even touch the menu. I was afraid that if I opened the thing something gruesome would crawl out....

The fat guy behind the counter came over and asked me, "What d'ya want?"

I told him. I said I wanted a cup of coffee and a donut.

He poured a cup of coffee, wiped his grimy hand on this smudged apron, and then he grabbed a donut off the shelf behind him....

As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning the door of the diner suddenly swung open and, to my discomfort, in marched eight or so provocative and boisterous prostitutes.

It was a small place and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman sitting beside me say "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be thirty-nine."

Her "friend" responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party?"...

"Come on!" said the woman sitting next to me. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women had left. Then I called over the fat guy behind the counter and I asked him, "Do they come here every night?"

"Yeah"! he answered.... "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanta know?"

“Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday,” I told him....
“What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?”

A cute smile slowly crossed his chubby cheeks and he answered with measured delight, “That’s a great idea!” Calling to his wife, who did the cooking in the back room, he shouted, “Hey! Come out here! This guy’s got a great idea. Tomorrow’s Agnes’s birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night!”...

Harry (that was his name) said, “The birthday cake’s my thing. I’ll make the cake.”

At 2:30 the next morning, I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe-paper decorations at the store and had made a sign of big pieces of cardboard that read, “Happy Birthday, Agnes!” I decorated the diner from one end to the other. I had that diner looking good....

By 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall to wall prostitutes ...and me!

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready (after all, I was kind of the M.C. of the affair) and when they came in we all screamed, “Happy Birthday!”

Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted...so stunned...so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter we all sang “Happy Birthday” to her. As we came to the end of our singing with “happy birthday dear Agnes, happy birthday to you,” her eyes moistened. Then when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.

Harry gruffly mumbled, “Blow out the candles, Agness! Come on! Blow out the candles!” ...Then he handed her a knife and told her, “Cut the cake, Agnes. Yoa, Agnes, we all want some cake.”

Agness looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, “Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I...I mean is it O.K....is it O.K. if I keep the cake a little while? I mean is it all right if we don’t eat it right away?”

Harry shrugged and answered, “Sure! It’s O.K. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake.” ...

Agness got off the stool, picked up the cake, and, carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door. As we all just stood there motionless, she left.

When the door closed there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, “What do you say we pray?”

Looking back on it now it seems more than stranged for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But then it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agness. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would

be changed and that God would be good to her.

When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, “Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of Church do you belong to?”

In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered, “I belong to a Church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning.”

Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, “No, you don’t. There’s no Church like that. If there was, I’d joint it. I’d join a church like that!”

(pp. 177-180, Beginnings: an introduction to the Christian faith)

I don’t know how you have experienced God’s call and claim on your life. But when I hear of the ways others have heard the voice of God, I sometimes wish I could hear as well as they did. You know what I mean? I wish I had the kind of insight that a Tony Campolo has to see a clear moment when God can be profoundly present with people loved by God but not much by others, maybe not even themselves. I wish I had the courage to get out of the boat with Zebedee more often than I do.

Are you open to those moments? Are you open to those situations in which Christ calls you to leave the comfort of your nets and boats to follow him to places and people in unexpected ways? Are you able to overcome the fears that taking the risk to follow him can raise? Because when we take the chance--when we take the risk and get out of the comfort zones of our boats--there is an indescribable joy and freedom in that kind of life. It’s like Jesus said: “Find your life and you lose it. Lose it and you will find it.”