

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
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Luke 5:1-11

“When God Calls”

Robert Frost’s well known poem “The Road Not Taken” is a must read. A traveler is walking through the woods and comes to a fork in the path. He looks at one path and then the other. One seems to be more traveled than the other. He ponders his decision: which road to take?

In the concluding lines the traveler speaks the words that are now so well known:

“I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

The story of Christianity begins when Jesus calls people to set out on a journey and take “the road less traveled by” and some of them, like Simon (later known as Peter), do. Now I realize that we don’t often think of Christianity starting like that but think about it; in order for any movement to gain traction, it must have followers. And often times the early followers sign up when the movement is in its infancy with no guarantee of going anywhere.

This was the case when Peter signed on to follow Jesus. Maybe he’d heard of Jesus prior to this, but maybe he hadn’t. We really don’t know. All we know is that after a long night of fishing and nothing to show for it, Jesus got into Peter’s boat, told him to head to deep water, and put down his nets for a catch. And Peter, after protesting that he’d already tried that but what the heck, he would try it again, caught so many fish he needed to call for reinforcement.

Now, one could argue that after a miracle like that it would be stupid of Peter NOT to follow Jesus. But one could also argue that after catching so many fish, Peter took a real risk to walk away from what was finally a profitable livelihood.

Most of us have at least once in our lives, like Peter, left the secure life behind. We've gone off to college, or moved across the country for a new job, or left the old life behind for a new one. I've only done it three times in my life: the first time was when I left home for a college 500 miles away where I didn't know a soul. But I was 18 and eager to get out of Ohio. The second time was harder; when Terry and I left Wisconsin for St. Louis we were leaving behind friends and a home we loved and that time I had two very young children. The stakes were higher; the move was more difficult than when I was 18. The third time was last year, when I moved here. I left a home and friends and family after putting down roots for 18 years; I uprooted children who had never known another home; and I left a church for no apparent reason other than the most important reason – that God was calling me to you. It's hard to explain to people that Jesus' call sometimes – most times – shows up unexpectedly. Jesus didn't show up for Peter after a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast; he called those men at the end of a long working day and then told them to keep on working.

Following God's call doesn't always come, usually doesn't come, when we expect it to come or in ways we expect it to happen. It's not often predictable or routine.

Truth be told, I'm rather averse to the whole idea of picking up and leaving the secure life behind. It's just not in my DNA. Except for time away from home in college and seminary, I lived in the same house my whole life until I got married. My childhood was about as secure as secure can get.

So when I think of Peter and Andrew and James and John leaving everything behind to follow Jesus' call, I am in awe.

I'd love to know what was going on in their hearts and minds and lives that they could just drop everything to follow God's, and Christ's call. I'd love to know if they were frustrated or bored or unhappy or restless. I'd love to

know if they knew something about Jesus when he came along and told them to “Follow me.” I’d like to know these things because it would help to explain the story, and it would provide some rationalization as to why they did what they did.

But we don’t get any back story or reason or rationalization, we only get a “do not be afraid”. And they left everything behind and followed him.”

Now, I realize that for most of us life is a little more complicated and complex and ambiguous than that. At 18, I could drop everything and follow. At 29, it was more difficult. At 47, it was even more difficult. I have a lot of nets in my life, and I can’t drop them that easily.

I’m also the type of person, when faced with a difficult decision, to list the pros and cons. If I do this, then it will have this consequence and if I do that it will have that consequence. Maybe some of you do the same thing.

But you know what? Sometimes you have to leave the shoreline. You can’t get to where Jesus calls by staying on the beach.

Which is scary. It’s scary to think about leaving everything behind because we like what is familiar. Familiar is good. It makes us feel safe and safe is good. Christian spirituality has a name for this feeling, it’s called attachment.

But it’s not a good attachment. The word used here comes from old European roots meaning “staked” or “nailed to”.

Which means that, theologically speaking, what makes us feel safe may also place us spiritually in peril. We hold ourselves back from what God intends for our lives. We choose stay on the shore, attached to what is familiar and secure, even when Christ tells us “don’t be afraid.” (*Christian Century Magazine, January 11, 2005*).

But God calls us even when we don’t have all the facts nailed down. God calls us to leave our secure lives and follow, even though we have a whole

host of insecurities about doing that. God calls us to follow, to step out of our comfort zones, and to have faith.

The Bible says faith is hearing the voice of God, the call of Christ, and following. It's what Sarah and Abraham did, and Moses and Paul, and Mary and Joseph, and Ruth and Naomi, and all the disciples. They stepped out in faith because they heard God calling them.

I realize that's not usually how we define faith. Many people think that faith is a noun-that it's something to be entirely understood and grasped, not something lived and lived into. Usually we define faith as a set of beliefs that we must subscribe to, because that's secure. It's rational. We can grasp that.

Presbyterians, especially, are good at the intellectual side of faith. We believe that no knowledge is off-limits. There isn't much we don't know for certain, or don't think we'll eventually discover. But the hard truth this story teaches us is that the journey begins without knowing all the facts. The hard truth of the story is that we set off on this journey because there's something compelling about Jesus that we cannot yet organize intellectually. (*Michael Lindvall, "A Geography of God", page 16.*)

Anselm, a renowned theologian of the medieval age, coined the term "faith seeking understanding." It implies that one trusts before having all the facts. It means that something in your heart has stirred you to begin on this journey of faith, something that you cannot grasp intellectually. So you begin your journey of faith trusting. And when you hit the road on that journey, you don't have all the facts. Even if you have a map and have had your mechanic give your car a good look over, you still don't have all the facts. There is always road construction. Jesus' disciples hit the road without all the facts. No new member classes, no orientation sessions, no discussion as to where they were going. They just went.

Trust and belief. Both are needed. And usually trust walks a few steps ahead of belief.

In our communion liturgy, in our liturgy to accept new members, and in our liturgy to ordain officers, you know what it asks about Jesus? Do you trust Jesus. Not *do you believe*, but do you trust. That's a statement of the heart, by the way, not the head.

Remember, the phrase is "faith seeking understanding" not "understanding seeking faith." Very few people come to faith through that door. It is rare to intellectually understand and then believe.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and author, wrote a memoir titled "Leaving Church." In that memoir she wrote that she finally arrived at the understanding that faith has more to do with trust than certainty. She wrote:

I trusted God to be God even if I could not say who God was for sure. I trusted God to sustain the world although I could not say for sure how that happened. I trusted God to hold me and those I loved, in life and in death, without giving me one shred of conclusive evidence . . .(While) this understanding had the welcome effect of changing faith from a noun to a verb (for me) . . .

Novelist Fred Buechner put it this way: "All-wise. All-powerful. All-loving. All knowing. We bore to death both God and ourselves with our chatter. God cannot be expressed but only experienced. In the last analysis, you cannot pontificate but only point. A Christian is one who points at Christ and says, 'I can't prove a thing, -but there's something about his eyes and his voice. There's something about the way he carries his head, his hands, the way he carries his cross – the way he carries me.'" (Wishful Thinking-A Theological ABC)

The hard truth of this story is that most of what you may come to understand about God can only be understood by following God.

In the end, you need to be willing to trust in a God you cannot see and whose ways you don't entirely understand. You need to be able to suspend a little disbelief in order to believe. Sometimes the head needs to give way

to the heart. And sometimes, just like the disciples, we need to be willing to leave the shoreline and follow.

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”*

Amen.