



Sunday, Jan. 24, 2021  
*Sermon Series: Love in Action*

Love Invites Others on the Journey  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

**Luke 5:1-11, 6:12-16 NRSV**

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, <sup>2</sup>he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup>He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. <sup>4</sup>When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." <sup>5</sup>Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." <sup>6</sup>When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. <sup>7</sup>So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. <sup>8</sup>But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" <sup>9</sup>For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; <sup>10</sup>and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." <sup>11</sup>When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

**Luke 6:12-16**

<sup>12</sup>Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. <sup>13</sup>And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: <sup>14</sup>Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, <sup>15</sup>and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, <sup>16</sup>and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

I first met Bill Smith in 1998. This was in my previous congregation in Bloomington. It was Easter Sunday. I was preaching about how hard it is to believe in the resurrection. I wisecracked, "Why, it's almost as hard to believe in the resurrection of the dead as it is to believe that the Minnesota Twins, with their present pitching staff, will win the World Series." Everybody laughed.

As worship ended, I was shaking hands in the narthex. A dark-haired, well-dressed gentleman approached me. He had a big grin on his face. “Hi,” he said, “I’m Bill Smith. I work for the Minnesota Twins.” *Oops.* And then he said something to the effect, “I’m doing my best to believe in our pitching staff. I have to. It’s my job.”

Later I found out more about Bill Smith’s story. While still in college in upstate New York, he got on a bus and traveled to the winter baseball meetings in Florida. He’d been working for the Twins ever since. And eventually he followed Terry Ryan and became general manager. He spent months and years sizing up talent, looking after young players, doing his best to live within a budget that was a whole lot smaller than that of the big, bad New York Yankees.

I asked Bill if he ever got stressed by his work. He shrugged and said, “Hey, it’s only baseball.” On one level, I suppose he’s right. It’s only baseball. It’s not bridge-inspection or research into a vaccine for COVID-19. On another level, though, I think it’s more than baseball. You see, a lot of people depended on Bill Smith. A lot of families entrusted their sons and spouses to him. A lot of young people in Minnesota imitate the values of baseball players...and those values start at the top. No, as I see it, what Bill Smith did for a living, at least at the time, was more than baseball. *It was a calling.*

Jesus meets up with some fishermen along the Sea of Galilee. The crowds are growing. The new rabbi is attracting lots of attention. Luke tells us he’s been sharing the word of God with people. The fishermen have returned from the lake. Jesus asks if he can borrow one of their boats. He gets in Simon Peter’s boat. They row away from the shore to create a bit more room. Jesus goes right on teaching.

When the teaching ends, Jesus shares a tip with Peter on how he might have more success with his fishing. You can picture Peter almost rolling his eyes, “We’ve been working all night and have caught nothing, but...whatever you say.” Peter and the others do what Jesus suggests. They put their nets into deep water. Incredibly, they wind up catching more fish than they can handle. Isn’t it interesting, Peter isn’t put out because the rabbi gives him advice on fishing. Instead he falls to his knees in humility, and then calls his fishing buddies to help. Suddenly this becomes more than a fish story. Jesus says to the fishermen, “I want you to come and follow me. But just a heads up,” says Jesus, “from now on you’re not going to be fishing for fish, but for the hearts and minds of people.”

We’re amazed at what happens next. Whether it takes a minute, or an hour, or a day for them to decide, Peter, James, and John drop everything—fishing gear, nets, boats—and start following Jesus. How do they do that?

A little background: it was customary at the time for rabbinic students to seek out a rabbi and to choose to learn from him. This story turns that custom around. It says that Jesus chooses them. It's almost as if he *knows* them and *wants* them. It sounds like a *calling*.

This is a great story, but we have to be careful with it. It can leave the impression that when Jesus comes calling, you need to stop whatever you're doing and—well—become a pastor or a missionary in Hong Kong or something like that. But that's not really what this story is saying. It's saying that when Jesus comes calling, he wants you to *follow* him. He wants you to be his disciple. As part of your discipleship, he might ask you to go fishing for people or to work for the Minnesota Twins. But either way, you will be *following* him. And you will have a *calling*.

I'm not sure we always believe that about ourselves. We can understand the need for a job, but does it rise to the level of a calling? If you read someone like Rick Warren, and his book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, you can get the impression that we are people of destiny. As people of destiny, God has assigned one particular thing for us to do...and if we don't do it, then we won't be following God's plan for our lives. That's pressure! We better choose the right door, because the prize behind the wrong door is a clunker!

I don't see a calling this way. I think there are lots of doors we can choose and still be within God's plan for us. Let me give you an example of what I mean. It's a story from Barbara Brown Taylor about her own calling from God. Taylor was feeling a tug to get involved in church work. She asked God about it over and over again, but heard nothing. Late one night, she pleaded with God to tell her as plainly as possible what she was supposed to do with her life. The answer that came into her sleepy head was this: "Anything that pleases you." She thought, "What kind of answer is that?" But the voice said it again: "Do anything that pleases you *and* stay close to me." Says Taylor, "That simplified things considerably. As far as God was concerned, I could pump gas in Idaho or dig latrines in Pago Pago...as long as I remembered that I belonged to God."

So, my friends, here's a question for you: *do you have a calling from God?* It can be hard to believe, I know, but I think you do. It starts in baptism. That's your calling is to live as a disciple of Jesus. Out of that *primary calling* come other callings—callings to go fishing with Jesus, to manage a baseball team, to teach school, to start a business, to sell real estate, to work at the Clinic, to be a homemaker.

Please hear me: in God's eyes, all of these callings are important. Let me take that a step further: in God's eyes, all of these callings are *equally* important.

The calling to be a pastor is no more important than the calling to be a yoga instructor. You might not believe that, but it's true. These callings are ways for us to serve God by serving our neighbors. We are the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

I say it again: Every one of us has a calling from God. Or should I say, *callings* from God. They show up in the main areas of our lives: occupation, family, community, church. God doesn't call us once, but many times. We're called to be the best spouses we can be, the best parents we can be, the best citizens we can be, the best burritos-servers we can be, the best quilters we can be, the best nurses we can be, the best ditch diggers we can be.

It sounds like a lot of work. And it is. Then again, we are *called* simply to get involved in the *ordinary* stuff of life. Here's the key—we are called to do it with an *extraordinary* sense that what we do matters deeply to God and is profoundly worthwhile to the work of God's reign. When we live our ordinary lives with that kind of attitude, why, we can move mountains. And we can be the disciples Jesus wants us to be.

Mark Nelson of Zumbro had heart valve surgery on Friday. In the weeks leading up the surgery, Mark learned as much as he could about what the surgery entailed, and what it would mean for his life. In talking with Mark, he was really hoping to get his valve repaired and not replaced. Why? Because if they replaced the valve, Mark would need to go on an anti-coagulant, a blood thinner. He wouldn't be able to donate blood anymore. For Mark, donating blood has been a very important way for him to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. Well, guess what? On Friday, Mark ended up with a valve *repair*. He was very relieved. In the months ahead, he hopes to resume his blood donation. It's one of his callings.

Peter, James, John, and nine other young men have a calling too. Eventually they become part of Jesus' group of Twelve. Jesus' ministry is expanding. He needs the help. No blood donors here. Jesus needs to surround himself with a small band of followers he can teach and train to carry on his work, even long after he's gone. We don't know all the details of the Twelve, but we do know that Jesus' work will continue, the challenges will mount, and Jesus will end up on the road to Jerusalem and a cross. At every turn, Jesus and the Twelve will invite others to join them on the journey, and they will do it in love.

Lest this work sound simple, don't be fooled. Jesus isn't exactly wearing a neon sign proclaiming himself Savior and Lord. And he refuses to get boxed in by people's narrow expectations. He's open to healing someone who's paralyzed, but he's also open to touching a leper, something that's strictly forbidden. He's open to eating falafels with fishermen for lunch, but he's also

open to joining tax collectors for dinner, and that's a big no-no. Observers are quick to criticize: Should Jesus be doing these things? And almost as quickly they answer *no!* You can imagine the furrowed brows of the religious leaders. They are starting to keep score!

Even as Peter, James, and John set aside their fishing boats, we sense it's going to be hard for them. They aren't exactly sure who this rabbi is and what they're supposed to be doing. Some in the crowd are whispering that he might be God's Messiah, the long-awaited king, but an ill wind is beginning to blow.

The predominant hope for Jewish people is that Messiah will come charging in on a white horse, wielding a sword, driving out the Romans, restoring Israel's greatness. But along comes this rabbi from Galilee, and what's he doing? Showing concern for the poor, restoring sight to the blind, touching a leper, healing the deaf, welcoming Gentiles, sitting down to dinner with all the wrong people. The question is not whether Jesus is doing these things, because he is. The question is: *should Jesus the Messiah* be doing these things? What about the Romans? What about restoring the nation to greatness?

Clearly, these are competing images of how God is at work in the world. These competing images will dog Jesus' followers for a long time and give them plenty of doubts. How can they know for sure? The fact of the matter is, they can't. It comes down to this: If they claim Jesus to be the Messiah, then they're saying that - in his ministry - they are seeing what the reign of God is meant to be. And if Jesus is doing these things then, by extension, they're supposed to be doing them too.

This is not a routine exercise in learning how to be disciples. Peter, James, John, and the rest of the Twelve have given their lives to this cause. There's a lot stake in competing images of how God is at work in the world, and what the reign of God is meant to be. I mean, is it power and glory and might and getting one's own way? Or, is it love and justice and concern for the poor and oppressed?

Let me bring this closer to home: If we were to ask militant Christian nationalists what their top priority was in the last election, they'd probably say: "We must win at all costs - because our way is the way of God! Even if we have to take up arms and storm the capitol, this is what God means for our nation to be, and for our rightful leader to be."

So, friends, are you buying it? I'm not. Like those early disciples, I don't understand everything about Jesus, but I look to him first to see what he's up to and to whom he's reaching out, so I can have a better sense of what the

reign of God is meant to be. At no point does this reign involve chaos at the capitol, a noose for the Vice President, and a desire to overturn a lawful election. My vision of the Messiah and the reign of God is bigger than that; it involves a lot more love; and it invites a wide assortment of folks to come along on the journey.

Friends, being disciples and following Jesus is hard, messy work. Much like those first disciples, Jesus isn't wearing a neon sign proclaiming himself Savior and Lord. We need to keep listening to his word, putting our nets into deep water, trusting that you and I have a calling to come and follow. Jesus needs us!

Twenty-two-year old poet, Amanda Gorman, said it well at the inauguration: "In every nook of our nation, in every corner called our country, our people, diverse and beautiful, will emerge battered and beautiful....The new dawn blooms as we free it, for there was always light, if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it."

Friends, that sounds like discipleship to me. A calling to be the light. The hands and feet of Christ in the world. Amen.