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“Reimagined: Call”

Part II of the Sermon Series, “Reimagined.”

Mark 1:14-20, 2:13-14

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I am going to read three call stories from the beginning of Mark’s Gospel. The first two call stories are together and are about two sets of siblings who, if you jump to another Gospel, are also partners. New Testament scholar Ben Witherington says that of the 12 disciples, there could have been four sets of brothers. In other words, Jesus’ closest followers begins as a “band of brothers,” strongly suggesting that those who are called into Jesus’s company come as much by families as by individuals.

The third call story tells of Levi who, as a Roman collaborator, is very much an outsider who folks like Simon, Andrew, James, and John normally shun. Having the stories together gives an interesting picture about how a faith community following Jesus can grow. It grows through friendships and kinships. It also grows because outsiders become insiders.

Listen to these call stories from Mark’s Gospel and listen for God’s calling you.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their



boat mending the nets.²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

¹³ Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. ¹⁴ As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

I am happy to welcome to worship representatives of Union Presbyterian Seminary, the seminary of which Elizabeth, Ben, and I- plus my wife, Millie- are alumni.

To get into seminary, to get through seminary, and to get a job out of seminary and into a church, I had to do something over and over again and that is talk about my “sense of call.”

It began with my admissions interview. It was conducted by a man who grew up in this congregation and who later became my favorite professor, Welfred Hobbie. “[George, tell me about your sense of call to ministry](#),” he said. I gave my most honest response that, honestly, was confused.

During student orientation, I was asked again to share my “sense of call.” Fortunately, several students went before me, and I could practice in my head what I was going to say. I was honest, but it was a more polished honesty.

I was asked again those times I met with presbytery committees that wanted to make sure I was suitable to be a candidate for ministry and then suitable to accept a call. I was honest, but it was a safe honesty... I was careful not to raise any red flags.

The process was necessary. Congregations deserve to have ministers with a genuine faith, necessary training, skills to serve and a conviction that she or he is called to this vocation. To make a point, I will put it in a crass way: *Before they give someone a salary with benefits*, they want to know if the candidate is fit for ministry.

The reason I put it so crassly is that we ministers get so practiced talking about our sense of call as a calling to ordained ministry that we can tend to equate being called to being called to a job. We ministers even sometimes start talking as if Christian vocation is simply Christian work, and that maybe all jobs are supposed to be callings, as if there is something wrong with doing a job primarily to pay the bills. Perhaps we Presbyterian ministers who have been raised with a Protestant work ethic do this more than ministers in other traditions. But does every job, paid or unpaid, have to be a spiritual experience?

There is a secular version of this expectation, and it goes something like this: *find a job doing what you most love to do*.

I’ve said that to my children because sometimes that’s good advice. But I saw a TicTok video recently that reminded me that one’s livelihood doesn’t always have to be one’s life. The woman in the video said that she once believed it to be true, that she should find a job doing what she most loves doing. She loved music: listening to music, playing music, learning, and teaching music. She became a music major in college and then took a job as a music teacher.

She came to regret that decision. Music became something she *had to do* to pay her bills. It got to the point where almost every time she played, listened, or taught music it was a chore to



meet a deadline. At the end of the teaching day, the last thing she wanted to do was what she used to most love doing. So, she changed careers. She got a degree in accounting, something she is good at and doesn't hate, but something that pays her bills so she can pursue what she most loves on her own time and on her own terms.

Again, not everyone is the same, and I certainly am not saying it is a mistake to have a job doing what you most love to do. I told her story simply to say that we can get sideways when we start making the automatic assumption that answering God's call in one's life is about doing jobs.

I don't think that these call stories in Mark's Gospel are about Jesus offering employment. These are stories about being called into a fellowship and a life. They are not about five men doing work that doesn't really matter being called into doing something that does matter, but about what happens when one has a relationship with Jesus... with God. These stories are not even about individuals coming to Jesus. They are about a community being gathered around Jesus. And I think we can learn a lot from these stories about how communities of faith can gather around Jesus today.

Let's take a closer look.

With all three call stories something happens that is easily misunderstood. Jesus calls out from the shore, "Follow me," and five gainfully-employed-men drop what they are doing and follow Jesus. Wow, "just say it and they will come?" If only it could be that easy to grow as a faith community today. Put an ad on a sign, a commercial on the radio, a flyer in mailboxes, crayons and a coloring book with a brochure inside front doors, show up on a social media feed, and then print extra bulletins, and then sit back because here they come (By the way, Emory would like to thank a South Roanoke church for the crayons, coloring book and brochure that showed up at our house this week).

I'm having fun, but not making fun. Hey, we do some of those things and it would be foolish not to because word needs to at least get out that we are here, with doors open where people possibly can find a community in which they can grow in their faith and serve the world.

And some churches truly might be so effective in marketing that they do grow tremendously in this way. Again, I'm not judging... not this morning, anyway.

But what is happening between Jesus and the disciples is not what I thought happened when I heard this story as a child. I heard this story as *a miracle story*. Two guys, Simon and Andrew, are on a boat fishing when this stranger calls to them to quit gathering fish and follow him to gather people. And then, *like men possessed*, without question or hesitation, they drop everything and follow this guy.

And I thought, "Is God going to call me that way, is that how it is going to go down? I'm going to hear this voice telling me what I'm supposed to do with my life and somehow I will trust it and do exactly what I am told?"

Hearing these stories as miracle stories can make you miss something that I think is really important:

Jesus already knows Simon and Andrew

Jesus already knows James and John



Jesus already knows Levi

That this is debated by some commentators baffles me. Jesus and these pairs of siblings are all the same age, and they all live in and around Capernaum— Jesus moved there from Nazareth when he was a child. In his day, Capernaum’s population is only around 1500 people. I’ve been to Capernaum. I could walk through the ruins in a matter of minutes. I could stop and yell to someone on the other side to come see what I just found. These people spent most of their waking hours outside, often eating meals on rooftops or in open courtyards. Yes, I’ve been to Capernaum and I lived in Mississippi so I know how well people get to know each other in small rural communities. That they would *not* have known each other that would be a true miracle story.

To be fair, Luke’s version of this story is different. That Gospel adds spice;
the salt of a miracle
and the pepper of a conversion.

In Luke’s version, Jesus is actually in the boat with Simon and Andrew teaching the crowd on the shore. Then, hearing that his boat-mates fished all night and caught nothing, he tells them to cast the net on the other side. They then pull in a huge haul

inspiring Simon first to confess his sins,
and then inspiring him and Andrew,
plus their partners, James and John,
to leave everything behind and follow this wonder-worker.

But even in Luke’s telling, there is clear evidence of an existing relationship. Despite the fact that they were exhausted having fished all night catching nothing, they do Jesus a favor by allowing him to sit in their boat and teach the people on the shore. Also, even before the miracle, Simon calls Jesus, “Master,” suggesting he not only knows Jesus but already looks up to him as a leader.

But Mark’s version is *not* a miracle story or a conversion story. It is simply a story about starting something because *it is time*.

Do you remember the two verses I read before telling of Jesus’ yelling out from the shore? John is arrested and Jesus picks up where John was forced to leave off. He calls for repentance, he announces the good news of the kingdom of God being at hand- which we will later learn in Mark’s Gospel is, at least in part, about a new way of being God’s people- a new way of seeing, believing, and living. And he begins what he says by saying, “**The time is fulfilled.**” “**It’s time.**” Something has been building, and now it is time.

That intro suggests that what he really is now saying to Simon and Andrew is, “*Hey boys, It’s time.*”

I suggested to you that Simon and Andrew
already know something about what Jesus is talking about.
They already know something about what Jesus is going to be about,
and what *they* will be about if they join him.
They already know something of his fresh vision of Israel,



of scripture and the Law of God,
of what it means to be God's people in this particular moment of time.
They already know something of what Jesus stands for,
and if he is now going public to spread his message,
then he needs help.
This is not something for him to do alone.

It's time.

It is time for them to decide if they are going to join him.

Now, were they crystal clear about what it would mean to follow Jesus? No. We don't need Mark's later stories of their confusion and struggles to tell us that. That is not how relationships and communities work. I did not know all what it would mean for me to be a minister when I decided to go to seminary. I did not know all what it would mean to be a part of your lives for 23 years? (Union Seminary didn't teach a course on pastoring during a pandemic, by the way, so no, I didn't know all that being a pastor would mean even two years ago).

- For those of you who are married, or were married, did you know all that marriage would be about when you offered or accepted a proposal?
- For those of you who have children, did you have any idea what all that would mean?
- Did you know all that your deepest friendships would mean when the friendships first began?
- Did those of you who are members of this church know all that would mean when you first joined?
- And when you first started giving conscious effort into being a Christian, did you have that figured out?

Those are rhetorical questions, of course. Answering the call of Jesus in Mark's Gospel is not to have all the answers. It is to be in a fellowship around Jesus in the Gospel cause and then following where that leads.

Knowing already something about what Jesus is about, the brothers decide to join in. These five happen to give up their day jobs for a time because that is what the moment calls for, but Jesus asks this of very few others in the Gospels. What Jesus does call everyone to do is to consider what it means to love God with heart, soul, and strength in life. This has as much to do with how one prays,
plays
and falls asleep at night
as with how one does work in the day.

I want to close by thinking about how people might feel called to be a part of our congregation. Paul calls the church "the body of Christ" and Second Presbyterian seeks to be an expression of his body. That is, we try to be the means by which the good news of the Gospel of



justice and compassion is experienced and shared. Jesus' cause is the cause of this church. How might people authentically join our fellowship and our cause?

Perhaps from these call stories in Mark, we can gain an appreciation of how powerful our friendship and family connections in building a community. Those connections draw people in when they already exist.

Perhaps these call stories in Mark tell us we can appreciate how the Levis, the outsiders, become a part of our community. If they come in not knowing anyone, and they find fellowship here- friends and kin-like connections- then they will remain.

Perhaps we'll let Luke's Gospel break in on the conversation and know that conversion has a place, that sometimes people who need to find a new life direction can find it if they can just find others that will support them, help them, and walk with them in a the direction they want to go.

Then we can go back to Mark's stories and remember that not everyone is looking to turn their lives around when they come to us. They already have an ongoing relationship with Jesus, and they find in us a community of common devotion and common cause.

In short, we can remember that being called by Jesus is being called into fellowship with him and with each other. It is to be in fellowship with a cause: to live by, and witness to, the good news of God's grace, however that is possible given the moment. However, if the movement grows and is healthy, it is grace that calls them in.

