

NO QUESTIONS ASKED
Cooke's-Portsmouth

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Matthew 4:12-23

One of the questions that I have been most commonly asked by people, when they learn that I am an ordained minister, concerns the nature of my call. Many assume, that since ministry is vocational and rooted in believing in unseen things, that there is often some earth- shattering phenomenon behind one's decision to become a minister. Peter Marshall, who became chaplain to the United States Senate during the Second World War, was a Scottish immigrant. One day before emigrating, while walking through the moors of his beloved Scotland, the hills were enveloped in a thick fog and he stumbled. He fell forward to the ground and his outstretched hands did not encounter any terra firma beneath him. Had he not fallen, he would have walked off the edge of a moor and plummeted to his death. That trip in the fog saved his life, and he interpreted that saving act as a call to ministry. In another time and place a minister from my youth wanted only to become a farmer. He was best- friends with a Baptist boy who wanted to become an ordained minister. The friend became ill and made a deathbed request of his compadre: since he would not survive his illness and would be unable to assume the vocation himself, he asked his friend, Jim, to become ordained in his place. The only matter that Jim needed to discuss was the denomination. Not being a Baptist, he asked if his own denomination would suffice. My call to ministry was not nearly as dramatic.

There were no deathbed requests, and no literal stumbling in the dark- there was much figurative stumbling however after the fact!. There was no revelatory audible voice in my ear, nor any bargains struck with God. There was, from the earliest time that I can remember, an inner

compulsion that I must do this. While I tried to pay no heed to that inner compulsion from the age of 16 to the ripe old age of 21 years when I finally registered for university, the inner compulsion would neither ebb, nor completely disappear. I simply knew that this was what I must do- in no less a way than a surgeon is drawn to the operating room, or a teacher to the classroom. I did need a nudge, however, to put my fears of being capable enough aside and take the first risk of responding and following.

After high school I had gotten a job in the mail room at McMaster University; I figured that I would work for a while until I knew for sure what I wanted to do. After working for two years and taking courses part time I ran into a friend of mine from high school, in the halls of McMaster, who was a student at Mac and she said, “Still delivering the mail, I see.” I answered that until I knew for sure what I wanted to do that this was a good enough job. She answered, “You will never know for sure until you quit this job, register at a university and begin studying. What have you been thinking about pursuing?” I answered, “Ministry” expecting raised eyebrows and dismissal. She responded, “Me too.” Then went on her way. Before I made it back to the mailroom I knew that I would quit my job that August and become a full time student. Like the first disciples I needed to be called from the sea to embrace something new as a disciple.

As in Matthew’s account my call was not prefaced by any extraordinary event, or teaching. In Luke’s account of the calling of the first disciples (5:1-11) Simon, James and John are have been toiling all night on the seas and have caught nothing. A stranger on the shore tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. They come ashore with their laden boats and walked

away to follow! Matthew has Jesus approach the fishermen. The reader is not informed that the fisherman have heard him speak, or seen him perform any feats of healing. Neither have they been blest with a remarkable catch that we know of. In Matthew, Jesus summons with irresistible authority and the fishermen respond with radical obedience.

In essence, Matthew has the disciples become almost representative of all future believers who do not see with their physical eyes that the lame walk, and the blind see. They embody the likes of us who have not heard him teach with our physical ears, and yet we have responded to the invitation to leave the world behind and enter the new world of faith in the Christ. (Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, 30-31). Follow me and I will make you fish for people.

The calling of the disciples is a compelling story on many levels. I find it particularly fascinating that Jesus did not seek out his disciples in the finest rabbinical schools, but gathered his disciples from the ordinary walks of life, where life experience had been a great teacher. Embodied in the fishermen was the requisite physical strength needed to pull laden nets filled with fish from the sea. The fishermen would also be able to make split second decisions in following after a school of fish, or in dealing with the elements of wind and wave. The fisherman had to trust his own intuition, putting the boat out a little deeper, or staying out just a little longer, or perhaps even making the decision to not venture out at all because of the potential for bad weather.

The fisherman had learned to read the ominous signs in the heavens that foretold of smooth sailing, or an approaching storm. Surely in his quest to amass a sea of followers, the Christ needed persons of strength who could abide the long hours of teaching and healing when the

people came. As the Christ still needs people who are unafraid of a little wind and the potential for rough seas when controversy arises, and winds assail our convictions. Christ has need of risk takers who will venture out a little further, and stay out a little longer in the quest for a significant yield. And the Christ has need of those who know how it feels to toil all night and expend great amounts of energy for little or no return.

In the calling of the disciples there was no promise of reward, and no talk of remuneration. There was no insurance or pension plan offered. There was simply the irresistible authority of the Christ, and the radical obedience of men of strength, unafraid to risk. Jesus invited them to follow and fish for people and they responded with their feet: no questions asked. The story is simple, pristine and awe inspiring, but life as a disciple was no bed of roses and sometimes we lose sight of that in the wake of this text.

Not only did the disciples need to comprehend the message of the man that they now served they also needed to unravel the mystery of his person. We know that after his arrest they all fell away; one betrayed another denied and they all cowered in fear. Perhaps if they had known what they were going to experience; if they had asked some questions they may not have been so quick to follow. But despite their fear in the days leading up to the crucifixion and the point of his ministry and message sometimes eclipsing them, they did not quit. So I think that Jesus saw in them something that they may not have seen in themselves. Jesus continues to call us from the sea when we need to be challenged and commissioned.

I was called away once while living a relatively risk free life in the mailroom of a university; and I believe that I was called away from the familiar a second time in 2007 when an opportunity opened up for me to travel to Whitehorse in the Yukon to cover a maternity leave when I had exhausted most opportunities for an appointment in the area close to home. It was one more example of how divinely things can fall into place.

My friend Doug Southen had sent my resume to some of his contacts throughout the world. On the strength of his recommendation I received notice of opportunity in places that I had never dreamed that I might live and work. I was considering a one year appointment in the Congo when he took me to lunch and raised some concerns about my personal safety. He asked if I had considered the Yukon because he had a friend who worked at a prison there. Why I would consider travelling three time zones away when we have myriad prisons in our backyard is probably a testament to my feelings of burnout and disillusionment with ministry. I contacted the local United Church minister in Whitehorse about names of folk who might be willing to board a displaced United Church minister for a year should I be offered a position and also offered my availability to do Sunday Supply while there. Within weeks I was asked if I was willing to do weekend supply from January to the end of May.

I traveled to Whitehorse assuming that I would discern some nudge into a new career; but that was not the case. My time there-doing what I had been trained to do but with much time to reflect and think- reaffirmed my sense of vocation. I was still a fisher of people. I came back to hearth and home knowing who I am and who I am not; where I belong and where I do not. I am a

disciple and fisher of people. And while I have not mastered all of the requisite skills, here I stand; I can do no other.

Jesus continues to call people from the sea to discipleship. The need is great. He still needs persons with strength of character and tenacity; followers who will not quit when the seas become rough and challenging; people who do not define success within a narrow margin of how full the nets are; or the market prices on a particular day. People who risk leaving the familiar for the unknown in faith, hope and trust. People who discern when the master nudges us in a different direction so that we might be still and know that God is. That God is alive and active in the world; that God continues to call as God has always called. That God continues to encourage us to see ourselves and others as God sees. Filled with potential to do and be more.

When Jesus recruited his first disciples he did not go to the finest rabbinical schools but gathered his disciples from the ordinary walks of life, where life experience had been a great teacher. The call then is the same as now: Follow me and will invest you with the equipment needed to catch souls. May we respond with the same radical and unquestioning enthusiasm as did those first sailors called from the sea. Amen.