

Leaving Our Nets

Matthew 4:12-23

Our regional minister, Rev. Eugene James posted this blog on January 17, 2017:

Four black persons kidnapped, held captive, and abused, a mentally challenged white youth over a period of three days in the city of Chicago. The story is no longer considered “news” but the facts are no less despicable and I’m still deeply troubled by it. I’m hurt, embarrassed, and outraged that four people could treat another human being so atrociously. It was a cowardly act of betrayal perpetrated on a very vulnerable individual who had placed his trust in one of the miscreants. The \$300,000 ransom demand was a demented attempt to profit from the crime. Incredible.

My question is what motivated the captors to sink so deeply into the depths of human depravity? Are their moral deficits so great as to negate any sense of decency or respect for life? What in their life experience warped their minds to such a degree as to render them capable of carrying out such reprehensible mistreatment of their victim? The answers will probably never be fully ascertained.

The authorities have designated this as a hate crime and I would agree. It’s my opinion that the victim was singled out because he was white and also mentally challenged. The disabled are a group that suffers abuse that in most instances goes unnoticed and is under-reported. Sadly, this is just one of many hate filled acts that has stained the fabric of our society. There are those who have taken the results of the presidential election as license to attack ethnic minorities. Islamic heretics have committed mass murders, police officers have been targeted and shot down in cold blood. There is a cloud of violent intolerance that hangs over the nation that threatens to blot out the light of respect and reconciliation. The malevolent act committed by these four individuals is a tragic example.

As a Christian, I am compelled to love even these four. I recall a verse of scripture, Ephesians 4:32, my mother would quote to us children whenever we had a dispute: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." It is my task to apply this lesson in this case. It is a task, but I must achieve it. Please pray for me and for the four malefactors.

It is not just our regional minister who is calling for a response. It is Jesus who calls.

In our passage, we learn that the onset of Jesus' proclamation and ministry came directly on the heels of the interruption of John's public activity. Matthew says that John had been arrested. The reason for his arrest was not provided, but it is safe to assume that it was in connection with his proclamation and baptizing activity. Matthew clearly tells us that Jesus' ministry advanced independently from John's ministry. No contact between the two was recorded after Jesus' baptism, and, with John's arrest, any contact after this point was highly unlikely. What we do know it was then that Jesus launched into the kingdom message and ministry to which God called him.

It was also after John's arrest that Jesus moved his residence from Nazareth to Capernaum, which is on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee. We don't know the reason, but scripture tells us that a prophet is without honor in his hometown. Matthew emphasized that this move by Jesus fulfilled prophecy (see Isa. 9:1-2 in Matt. 4:15-16). "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light " (v. 16). With Jesus' move, it would be those in Capernaum, those in the surrounding areas, and even those in the whole world who were going to receive the light, in the person of Jesus.

As he began his ministry Jesus (in v. 17) declared his kingdom message—"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Jesus was doing what he had

come for: to announce and usher in God's kingdom. It is not untrue to say that Jesus came to earth to die, however it is more true to say that he came first to live. He came to announce, invite sinners into, proclaim the demands of, and in the end bring in God's kingdom.

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee he called the first four of his disciples. All fishermen, he called them to follow him. Matthew said they immediately left what they were doing and followed Jesus. We are struck by this idea that immediately they left what they were doing. It is as if they were compelled to follow Jesus and to obey him, almost as if they had been waiting all their lives to hear this voice, to be issued this call, so that when it came, they dropped what they were doing.

Matthew does not give us any preparatory details before the calling of Simon, Andrew, James, and John. This lack of detail, though, is not without its own significance. As commentator Douglas Hare notes, "the call story is here reduced to its barest essentials: Jesus summoned with irresistible authority, and the men responded with radical obedience." You and I are amazed by their response. First, they "immediately" (vv. 20, 22) followed him, seemingly with no qualifications or questions asked. Second, they left their profession, a likely lucrative business of fishing, to walk after Jesus. There were no suggestions as to how they will be provided for, and there was no promise of "upward mobility." Finally, though not explicitly stated, their response was radical due to the fact that they also left their families. This call, put rather boldly by Matthew, was given unapologetically as being what Jesus demanded.

Augustine understood this call as he opened the first book of his *Confessions* with the prayer and statement that "our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." Indeed, it would seem that even these four who were already in a worthy vocation had restless hearts—so restless that when they heard Jesus' call to them, they could do nothing

else but leave everything behind and follow. Perhaps they were simply responding to what had already been imprinted on their souls from birth—like animal mothers and their babies who recognize each other by sound and smell - the knowledge of the voice of God—so that when they heard the voice, all they could do was obey.

Rodger Y. Nishioka and Greg Garrett

Jesus' call to radical obedience has not changed over these many years; the demands have not been reduced. Jesus waits not for persons to apply to him in hopes of learning under him, as many young Jewish males would have done for their rabbinic education. Instead, rabbi Jesus is the one who seeks out followers, learners, apprentices who do not have to qualify for such a relationship, only have the willingness to lay down everything else. What a call! What a mission! What a Savior!

Troy A. Miller

The psalmist in Psalm 40:9-10 understood this when he sang:

⁹I have told the glad news of deliverance
in the great congregation;
see, I have not restrained my lips,
as you know, O LORD.

¹⁰I have not hidden your saving help within my heart,
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness
from the great congregation.

Today Jesus is still calling for those who will leave their nets, ones who will follow with devotion and faithfulness. Will you leave your nets and learn of Jesus? Will you come and be a part of this great mission and ministry of becoming fishers of men and women and boys and girls. There are so many who still need to know of the love of God and salvation in Jesus Christ. Like Simon Peter and Andrew—and later, James and John—let us respond to the call. You need not worry about the words to

say or the activities to draw others to Christ. Come and learn of him and he will equip you for the task!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.