

Leaving the Boat

Sermon 87 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 24, 2021

Mark 1:14-20

Last week we read the story of the calling of Samuel and marveled at the young boy's courage in saying, "Here I am," to God's voice which spoke to him in the middle of the night. We then followed Samuel's story as he spoke an uncomfortable word of divine disappointment to those who, by profession and title, should have known better. This week I'd like to ask us to fast forward a bit to the year 1205, when a young man named Francis entered a small, dilapidated chapel near Assisi, Italy. He claimed to have been driven by the impulse of the Holy Spirit to enter the chapel, to kneel, and to pray beneath a cross.

Until very recently, Francis, better known as Francesco Bernardone, had been a bit of a wealthy playboy. He was the only son of an Italian cloth merchant who had made a fortune trading throughout Europe. In fact, his Father's affinity for the French and his successful business dealings with them are the reasons he named his son "Francesco". His was a life of stability and luxury – all because of the family business.

From an early age, Francis was fascinated with the ethical ideals of medieval chivalry and dreamt of living a life of selfless devotion, loyalty, generosity, and compassion while winning fame and glory as a real-life knight in shining armor.¹ Unfortunately, his military career got off to a terrible start. Early on, he was defeated in battle and held as prisoner of war until his father gathered the funds to pay his ransom. During his time in jail, Francis turned to the words of scripture for comfort and hope. This experience of complete and utter brokenness transformed him and set his life upon a new and very different trajectory.

After his imprisonment, God began to speak to Francis, in some rather mysterious ways. Legend has it that one day as he was riding horseback from one town to the next, he saw a leper in the road. He initially gave his horse a nudge to hurry on by; but as he sped past he thought he saw the face of Christ in the leper and so he halted the animal, turned around, and knelt down beside the figure in the street. He kissed the stranger and gave him all his money before loading him up on the back of his horse and taking the man to his destination.²

Another one of these mysterious encounters with God happened in that San Damiano chapel, beneath the cross where Francis was on his knees praying. Francis was beginning

¹ *Little Flowers of St. Francis*. 14.

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-14/st-francis-of-assisi-on-joy-of-poverty-and-value-of-dung.html>

to understand that God was calling him to be a disciple. Much like the fishermen on the shore of Galilee and young Samuel in the Temple, Francis knew that God wanted him to live his life for Christ. ...He just wasn't exactly sure what that looked like. So when the Spirit led him into that old, run-down chapel in San Domiano, he was ready to listen. That day, beneath the cross as he knelt down in prayer, he heard God call out to him:

*“Francis, go and repair my church,
my church which, as you see, is falling into ruins.”*

Francis understood this call was to rebuild the literal building in which he was praying; but he also began to see the whole institution was in need of a renovation, so to speak. For the next year he devoted his life to the poor, giving extravagantly to the poor and living his life among the dispossessed and marginalized. His new lifestyle marked such a change from his old ways that in 1206 when he was just twenty-five years old, his father pled with him before the bishops court in an attempt to regain some of the money Francis had given away. Francis responded by stripping himself naked as a symbol of his rejection of all worldly possessions and his complete devotion to God. He would wear a humble frock for the remainder of his life.

Francis' father disowned his son, because of his radical commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His father could not understand why his son would trade wealth and status for a life lived among the poor and the sick. But Francis was learning what it meant to be a disciple of Christ, a follower of Jesus. And for him, it meant turning away from the family business, abandoning the family inheritance, and walking away from his father who just could not understand.

Today's reading from Mark's Gospel tells a more ancient but similar tale of sons called away from the family business. After his baptism and trials in the wilderness, Jesus returns to Galilee, proclaiming the message of his baptizer: *Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near*. To the original audience, this proclamation implied an apocalyptic change, the dawning of a new day, a new social order that would arrive through miraculous divine intervention. But what Jesus does next does not seem to fit these expectations. Rather, he strolls the shoreline and sees Simon and Andrew, fishermen, casting their nets into the sea.

Follow me, he calls out to them, *and I will make you fish for people*, Jesus says and immediately the boys left their nets to follow. Together the three walked the shore until they came upon another pair of brothers. James and John sat mending their nets when Jesus called out. They too, left their father, his hired hands, and the family business to join the newly emerging group of disciples.

The way Mark tells the story, glossing over extraneous details and moving swiftly through the narrative as Simon, Andrew, James, and John make life-altering decisions that would redefine their families and their futures, one could minimize or overlook the gravity of what is happening here. So let's slow it down a bit. The four men called that day were part of an independent artisan class that was different from the day laborers they were able to hire.³ They were part of a system that provided them both social and economic stability. As sons, they would have been expected to work on the boats alongside their fathers, participating in and benefiting from the family relationships and the household economy. To walk away from the boat was to abandon all of this. To follow Jesus meant that all of their economic security and all of their closest relationships would have to be redefined – if they could be salvaged at all.

And for what? Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God was at hand but from the looks of it, nothing big and exciting was happening. There were no divine armies or rulers enthroned on high breaking through the structures of oppression under which God's chosen people were living. There were no outward signs that the kingdom was near. Only a man from Nazareth – aka Nowheresville – walking the Galilean shoreline and building a new community.

We know, because we've read a little further in the story, that this new kind of family unit that Jesus is building will go on to change the course of history – but not in the way anyone expected. These fishermen, these ordinary sons, with ordinary jobs, and otherwise ordinary lives would spend their days among those whom ordinary society had deemed unlovable. Those who were ritually impure and unable to participate in the religious life of the community, those who were sick and unable to serve a helpful role, those who were women or children, those who were trapped in unhealthy cycles of toxic relationships, those who were struggling (like all of us do) but who wore their brokenness on the outside, where everybody could see it... these were the people for whom Simon, Andrew, James, and John left their boats on that day.

And it is through these people both ordinary and outcast, that God's kingdom really is breaking through.

Sometimes when we read these stories about the disciples we imagine their *metanoia*, their turning away and turning around to be a personal spiritual act. But here, in Mark's Gospel, these new disciples are choosing God's social order over and above that which their world had to offer. Here in Mark's Gospel, these ordinary fishermen are leaving

³ Meyers, 132.

behind their families, leaving behind their trade, their identity as fishermen, their income and they are becoming something totally new.

In much the same way as Francesco Bernardone became Francis of Assisi, Simon, Andrew, James, and John were becoming the first of twelve who would usher in God's own dream – but who first had to leave behind everything they'd ever known.

It can be easy to remember these early disciples and saints as extraordinary examples of faith, people who gave everything in order to follow Jesus. When we remember them that way, their stories can begin to feel so distant and disconnected from our modern lives that we cannot even imagine a comparable situation. We cannot relate to following Jesus in such a way.

But if we just take a minute to consider our own boats... the plans and professions that give us an identity and material value... and the strong and steady boats of our comfortable social locations, our race, our gender, our networks... all of these social and economic vessels that ensure everything is going to be alright if we keep on working the plan.

These are our ordinary boats, our ordinary resources that God is calling us to leave behind by seeking out and elevating others around us who do not experience such abundance, such sturdy support.

Or maybe for us it isn't the plan, the security, the proverbial "boat" that you need to leave behind. Maybe there is a net in your hand, perhaps one that keeps getting caught on your finger even as you try to let it go, keeping you tied down to one boat or another. Maybe that net looks like self-doubt or insecurity... maybe it's anger or jealousy... maybe it's isolation or despair... or maybe it's just an overwhelming sense that you're not good enough to ever be used by God.

If this is us, if this is how we are feeling today as we contemplate discipleship and as we listen to God's calling on our lives, if it is doubt that is wrapped around us like a net preventing us from boldly and bravely following Jesus into the forgotten corners of our world then maybe we need to be reminded that God's kingdom subverts all of our qualifications. It is the lowest of the low, the most unworthy, unwanted, and unloved who are the first to understand the kingdom of God. And therefore there is absolutely nothing that could ever deem you or me or anyone else unworthy of being called a disciple.

All we have to do is get out of the boat, to untangle ourselves from all the nets that are tethering us, and to turn our whole selves to Jesus who walks along the shore calling out to any and all in sight: "Come and follow."