

“The Call to Step Up” Rev. Judy Bagley-Bonner

Psalm 46 Matthew 4: 12:23

The poet, Roland Flint, tells today’s Gospel story, about the call of the first two disciples, in a different, more colorful way.

Now here is this man mending his nets
after a long day, his fingers
nicked, here and there, by ropes and hooks,
pain like tomorrow in the small of his back,
his feet blue and stinking of baits,
his mind on a pint and supper – nothing else –
a man who describes the settled shape
of his life every time his hands
make and snug a perfect knot.

I want to understand, if only for the story,
how a man like this,
a man like my father in harvest,
or a fisherman in the stench of lobstering,
or a teamster, a steelworker,
how an ordinary working stiff,
even a high tempered one,
could just be called away.

It’s only in one account
he first brings in a netful –
in all the others, he just calls,
they return the look or stare and then
they “straightaway” leave their nets to follow.
That’s all there is. You have to figure
what was in that call, that look.

(And I wouldn’t try it on a tired working man
unless I was God’s son –
he’d kick your tail right off the pier.)

If they had been vagrants,
poets or minstrels, I’d understand that,
men who would follow a different dog.
But how does a man whose movement,

day after day after day,
absolutely trusts the shape it fills
put everything down and walk away?

I'd pass up all the fancy stunting
with Lazarus and the lepers
to see that one.

A second piece written by Dr. James Allen Frances entitled "One Solitary Life"

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself...

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth – His coat. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen long centuries have come and gone, and today He is a centerpiece of the human race...

I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.

So we are left with the question that has haunted people over these now twenty plus centuries:

Who was this Jesus such that those first disciples would just put down their nets and walk away?

Who was this man whose humble, solitary life has affected people so profoundly for over two thousand years?

Well, theology has been trying to answer that question ever since Pilate first asked it of Jesus in his trial. Jesus, if you remember, like all good spiritual teachers and therapists, turned the

tables on Pilate and said, “who do you say that I am?” And Pilate is said to have answered, “Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God.” ...But, you know, in one way, that’s not really a whole lot of help either, because the words “Christ” just means “anointed one” and could apply to any significant prophet, and, in a way, we are all sons and daughters of the living God, so there is ambiguity in that answer as well. Not to mention the fact that Jesus’ answer was, “It is you who has said it.” Talk about ambiguity! Still, with this interchange, the newly forming Church was off and running with what theology calls the question of Christology- was Jesus, as the fourth century council would make orthodox, “light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father?” (In other words, was he uniquely divine?) or was he, as the losing side of the debate, Arius’ side would suggest, the clearest manifestation of God, to be sure, but so are we all sons and daughters of God, just to a less evolved extreme.

These are the sorts of questions we ministers consider in seminary. I personally have held both positions at different times. And here is the thing. After anguishing over the question, and at various points in my life coming down on both sides, I now have a whole new take. The resolution came to me in one of the most dramatic, experiential interventions from God I have ever experienced. When I was on staff of a large UCC Church in Cleveland, we used to do “Lectio Divina” or prayerful reading of scripture at our staff meetings. One day, we were discussing the passage I referred to, about Pilate asking Jesus who he was. About half that large staff came down on the side of Athanasius, the more orthodox position of believing Jesus to be the one and only complete incarnation of God; and about half the staff coming down on Arius’ side, believing Jesus to be a human who more clearly than any other, incarnated God, but who was not different in substance than the rest of humanity.

After the discussion, I was walking back to my office, really distressed about this question that had off and on haunted me over the years. And you know what, it was suddenly as if I heard a voice. (I remember exactly where in the hall I was standing, the moment was so significant.) It wasn't an audible voice, but was fully formed words in my mind that felt like they had come from an outside source, and the voice said, "Judy, it's OK. It works either way." And even though I still cannot ferret out the nuances of the question in a way that would express my belief with crystal theological clarity, since that time, I have been at peace with the mystery. Because it seems to me that what really matters is that we, as Christians, FOLLOW this Jesus. The one who inverted power structures and included the outcasts, and preached love and compassion even, maybe especially for one's enemies.

So, first, I believe we need to take to heart his number one topic, his first call, to embody, in increasing amounts as we grow spiritually, the reality of the Kingdom, or Realm of God. The Kingdom of God is the vision of reality toward which we, as the Church, are to be working. It is the vision of life where love and wholeness reign both interpersonally and collectively. So it bespeaks a world, first of all, where unjust structures are righted, and there are no more "isms" like racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, genderism, etcetera, because justice has poured down like mighty waters and everyone has access to power and resources. and corporate peace finally comes as a result of love. Some of you have seen the poster I have in my office which says, "at the table of peace will be bread and justice." Indeed, that is the corporate vision of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, and about which Jesus was passionately concerned. He came not just to be a personal savior, a personal friend who helps us with our personal problems, although he certainly is that. But he also came to preach the inverse of the usual power structures, the inclusion of the poor and disenfranchised and sick and broken ones. He came to

invite us all up to our higher selves so that we might work for and help embody that corporate kingdom of love and justice here and now. Not that we have to force everybody to talk about it in Christian terms. A rose by any name is still a rose. He came to introduce the reality of the Kingdom of God, not necessarily Christian language about it.

But just as he came to fix the big picture, so too did he come to change our individual lives, to model what it looks like when one is intimately rooted in the Spirit and in the love of God each minute of every day. When one eventually gains a glimpse of, and grows into, a spiritual way of being in the world, and can offer God's love instead of ego based defensiveness in arguments, and can stop all the judging, and looking for things to be self righteous about, and can let things go and see with compassion, to name a few of the personal manifestations. In preaching the Realm of God as his first concern, Jesus offered a vision both of a healed world, and of healed, individual spiritual lives.

The second way I think we are to follow him is to learn, as he did, to overcome fear. To lead lives indeed rooted in love, not fear. He chose love over fear every time, even when to do so caused him to be in trouble with the authorities of the day. Even when it eventually led to his torture and death. He remained insistently rooted in love, in God's gracious Spirit of loving compassion. (I can't even do that most of the time that I see a Facebook posting I object to!) And maybe this is where Psalm 46 comes in: "God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear."

Well, these are at least two of the ways in which we are to follow Him. And it's what he calls us to just as surely as he called those first disciples. Whether we believe Athanasius' position or Arius's as to his nature, the call is the same: to follow him in sharing the good news of the

Kingdom of peace and justice and love and compassion for all people, to work on building it in both our world and our private lives, and to consciously choose love over fear in both those arenas as well.

Today we will have our annual meeting. It is important to look over the past year, and to elect leaders for the next. It is important to consider our budget. It is important to tend to our institutional concerns. But if we take up those questions without considering the underlying questions of how we have and will further the coming of the Kingdom, how we embody love over fear in our lives and in the wider community, then we are full of sound and fury signifying nothing.

Too many churches have yielded to the temptation to become mere dead institutions or social clubs, have yielded to the temptation to bicker over minutia and perpetuate drama and to save themselves as institutions at the cost of their true identity. They perpetuate churchianity rather than real, lively, love based Christianity. Above all, may God save us from such a fate. May the Spirit ever blow here with the sound of a rushing wind. And may we each, individually and collectively, step up to follow our risen head..the one who came to proclaim and embody the Kingdom of love the one who taught us to live from love, not fear.