

“Choice”

The Reverend Pen Peery

Date: January 21, 2024



Last week and this week we are circling around two different Scriptures that tell about a particular time in Jesus’s life and ministry: right at the beginning of his “launch,” when he called those who would become his disciples.

Last week we read from the gospel of Mark and I focused Jesus – and what made people want to follow him. This week I am reading from the gospel of John and am focusing on a particular disciple named Nathaniel – and why he decided to follow Jesus.

Before we read the Scripture, let’s first go to God in prayer and then be centered by the choir.

Let us pray: *When we turn to these ancient words, O God, by your Spirit, help us remember that these stories not only describe what was...but that they describe what is...and what will be. So open our ears, and our minds, and our hearts to listen. We ask it in faith and through Christ. Amen.*

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Our Scripture for today is from the first chapter of John – verses 35-50. Listen with me for the word of God:

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’

They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter).

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’

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I wonder if Jesus ever had a miss in his early-disciple-recruitment-period?

The way the gospels tell is – last week in Mark, and today in John – Jesus bats 1000. He called – the disciples follow. Last week we heard about Jesus walking up to fisherman who simply dropped their nets. Today we hear about a chain of events that nets Jesus, first two, then three, then four, and finally five disciples.

But I wonder if – maybe – there are parts that the gospel writers left out for the sake of moving the story along.

Did Jesus ever approach a potential disciple with an invitation to follow him and have someone say, “I’m going to take a raincheck on that, Jesus.” Or, “Let me think about it...but can you tell me what my return on investment might be if I choose to say yes?” Or, “I’m a little busy right now. I’ve got a project at work that requires my attention and if I don’t hit my number I’m not going to get my bonus.”

When Jesus started putting his team together – the group that would walk with him...and help him establish what would become, at first, a very small movement – a Rabbi teaching crowds, reframing the way people understood their own tradition, doing miracles, embodying love – a movement that, of course, would one day grow from a dozen disciples following Jesus to what became known as “the church,” – when Jesus started putting that team together, all we hear about are the successes. But I wonder if Jesus ever missed? And if he did, I wonder if that ever made Jesus nervous.

That’s kind of strange to think about, right? Jesus being nervous. Jesus feeling anxious. We tend to think about Jesus being calm. The one who stood in the boat and calmed the wind and the waves of the storm. The one who was tested, again and again, by his doubters and who calmly answered in such a way that turned the question on the questioner. We tend to think about Jesus as always being calm.

But since we also say we believe Jesus was fully human, it stands to reason that Jesus got anxious from time to time. This morning I wonder – during that early-disciple-recruitment period – if that was one of those times.

I mean, I know Jesus didn’t read Steven Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, but – intuitively – everyone knows it is important to get the right people on the bus if you are trying to go somewhere. I wonder if Jesus worried about whether he was getting the right people on the bus?

And – I know this is strange to think about – but I wonder if Jesus, once he understood and accepted his calling, felt a sense of urgency to recruit and then deliver on his mission? I wonder – if things ever did feel like they were going slowly, or losing momentum – I wonder if Jesus worried that maybe he wasn’t the right man for the job that God asked him to do? Said differently, I wonder if Jesus ever felt the pressure to perform in his calling to be the Messiah – if Jesus ever felt the pressure of being the one to launch this movement that became the church? And, if so, I wonder if any of that pressure ever got projected onto his need to recruit good disciples?

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According to John, even if Jesus was worried about it, he didn't need to be – because everybody Jesus asked to be a disciple said yes. And in every case, that yes came quickly and easily...save for the last ask of Nathaniel, which...almost...didn't happen.

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You heard me read it a few minutes ago, but let me frame the Scripture up again in terms of a play-by-play. Big picture, what happens in this story is that Jesus recruits five new disciples. To land these five disciples, Jesus uses four different recruitment strategies.

For the first two (and we only get the name of one of these first two – Andrew), Jesus essentially recruits from a competitor. You might have missed it, but the first two disciples Jesus calls in today's Scripture were already disciples of John (as in John the Baptist). John had his own group of followers trying to do God's work. This would be kind of like recruiting the Methodists or the Episcopalians to join our church.

The third disciple Jesus recruits – Simon Peter – is the brother of Andrew. Raise your hand if you decided to become a part of the church because of your family? This is a tried and true disciple-recruitment-strategy.

For his fourth recruit – Jesus calls Philip. They encountered Philip when they had gone to the region surrounding the Sea of Galilee – which is where Simon and Peter were from. This is kind of like asking your neighbor where they go to church. Call it a “referral-based strategy.”

What happens with the fifth disciple Jesus recruits, though, is different. Nathaniel is his name. There's no obvious connection point with Nathaniel. He's not related to any other disciple. He's not in the same network. He's not a member of another church. And – he's a little cautious...curious. Philip tells him about Jesus of Nazareth, and Nathaniel kind of scrunches up his nose... “can anything good come out of the backwater town of Nazareth?”

My friend and colleague, Joe Clifford – pastor at Myers Park Presbyterian Church – calls Nathaniel the “patron saint of skeptics.” Nathaniel isn't going to join this following of Jesus because it's “just what you do.” Or because someone in his family tells him he should. He's going to come to it on his own.

In a different way than the others who become disciples, Nathaniel makes a **choice** to follow Jesus.

And, to his credit, Philip – who does the initial recruiting – doesn't pressure Nathaniel. Philip doesn't try to guilt him into being a disciple. He doesn't frame it in terms of what the movement needs – another warm body, another person to help make the Jesus movement viable and legitimate. No, Philip meets Nathaniel where is – understanding that Nathaniel is someone who needs to make his own choice – and he simply echoes Jesus's invitation: “Come and see.”

I know you may have heard about the amazing things that Jesus has done, and taught...and that you might wonder what it is all about. So come and see.

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I know you might have real reasons for your reservations, but trust me – it’s worth it: come and see.

I know life can be crazy and it’s hard to imagine fitting anything else into a busy schedule – but this will fill you up, not wear you down: come and see.

I began this sermon with some questions wondering if Jesus ever felt the pressure to perform – or got anxious about his responsibility to recruit and grow the group of disciples who would one day take the baton and carry the movement that became the church. And I wondered if that anxiety ever got wrapped into the recruitment effort.

In Nathaniel’s case, it certainly doesn’t seem so. And I think that’s a good lesson for us all these years later.

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I’ve been preaching from this pulpit for over 11 years now – and I’ve noticed a trend...I think it’s a good trend.

More and more, we have people who are part of our community of faith because they choose to be. To be sure we have people – like me – whose decision to be a follower of Jesus and a member of a church happened as a matter of course – like many of you, I was raised in a church...and decided to keep walking in that path as I became an adult. And I have found that to be a wonderful way into the path of discipleship.

But more often than happened 11 years ago, I notice that the people who join our community of faith didn’t grow up in churches, or they haven’t been in so long that they don’t remember...I notice that we’ve done a good number more adult baptisms in the past 3-4 years than I have in any other time in my ministry...and that is something that I celebrate.

Here’s what I suspect – strongly: in years to come, the trend will continue. People will be a part of our community of faith because they choose to be, not because they are expected to be or because they just grew up in the habit.

I remember talking to a member of my last congregation – a woman who had six children (who were, by that time, grown and with children of their own). Jacque Giddens was her name. She talked about getting those kids ready on Sunday morning – crow-barring them out of bed, getting them fed, wrestling them into clothes, keeping the peace in the station wagon on the drive, and then getting them to Sunday School on time – whereupon Jacque would then go back to her car in the church parking lot and take a nap for 30 minutes!

And that was before travel soccer, and social media, and birthday invitations to Sunday brunch.

Today church is even more of a choice.

And – candidly (though you know this already) – there are going to be fewer and fewer people making that choice...which makes a lot of people who feel the responsibility for building and sustaining the church...anxious.

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Inconveniently, being anxious about sustaining a church is not the most effective method of inviting new disciples to choose to follow Jesus.

Let me pause here to say two things:

1. Over the past number of years, I think our church has done a *really* good job of being genuine and warm and invitational in our approach to welcoming new people and families into our community of faith and meeting them where they are. If you want to thank someone for that, go tell our membership coordinator, Jane Ives, that she is doing a fabulous job.
2. I recognize that it is pretty easy for me to offer a warning for churches not to let their anxiety about sustaining their future carry over into their desire to recruit new members. We are coming off a year where our attendance has grown, our membership has grown, our stewardship has grown, and our momentum has grown. All of that is somewhat of an anomaly in church-world.

But it wasn't too long ago that I would say we felt anxious as a church. That's certainly been the case in my tenure as your pastor. And it was the case at points in my predecessor, Bill Wood's, tenure. And before him, at some points, in Carswell Hugh's tenure. And before him in Lee Stoffel's tenure...

It is normal for churches to sometimes feel anxious – because we know just how precious our community and our mission are.

What matters is whether we let that anxiety spill over into our reasons for wanting people to participate in the work that we are called to do in Jesus's name – and the reasons we want people to enlarge our community.

What is compelling about the life of faith is not whether a church feels good about its future – what is compelling is Jesus.

And the shape that a life takes by following in his path...

And the way Jesus teaches us to love – and appreciate – the parts of our lives that we often take for granted...

And the way we are transformed when we learn to serve others...

And the way belonging to a community in Christ helps us to know what it is to be loved unconditionally by God.

But don't just take my word for it.

Come and see...

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.