

“Impact”

Series: *Follow Me*

Scripture: Matthew 4:18-25

Rev. Pen Peery

January 19, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

This January we've been focusing on stories where Jesus invites people into a life of discipleship. It's more than an exercise in observation, of course. Our hope is that reflecting on the stories of others' discipleship can inform our own journeys as those who are called to be followers of Jesus in the life that God has given us to live in the here and now.

Today, our passage is from the gospel of Matthew – and it is the story of Jesus calling four of his disciples from the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee. Before we hear it, please join me in prayer.

Holy God – day-in-and-day-out we are surrounded by words...on screens, over the airways, in our homes and places of school and work. For the next few moments, though, by the power of your Holy Spirit, help the words from this ancient book take root in us in a different way than the others that fill our days. Speak to us; shape us; save us. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Listen now with me for the Word of God from the fourth chapter of Matthew's gospel:

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

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Tomorrow is a lot of things.

It's going to be cold, evidently.

It's the day our nation practices the peaceful transfer of power as we inaugurate a new President.

It's also the day we celebrate the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and the impact he made on our nation, generally, and through his leadership of the Civil Rights Movement in particular.

Dr. King's legacy is worth remembering more than once-a-year on a Monday in January, but still, MLK Day reminds me of being in elementary school and first saw the grainy video of him giving his "I Have a Dream" speech on the National Mall, or when I was in seminary and first his book *Strength to Love* which transformed me, or how convicted I felt when, as a middle-aged and established pastor, I re-read his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" that was addressed to moderate, white, southern clergy like me, or what I learned about his leadership of the Poor People's Campaign in the late '60s.

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Martin Luther King wasn't perfect – some people take too much delight in pointing that out – but what always strikes me when I think about him is just how much he took following Jesus seriously. It cost him, of course – in many, many different ways even beyond the way it cost him his life. But what is undeniable is that the way that Martin Luther King followed Jesus made a difference in the lives of his sisters and brothers in Christ and in the world.

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I have a hunch that most of us understand that part of being a Christian means that we are a follower – or a disciple – of Jesus.

I also would guess that many of us are completely intimidated or overwhelmed by what we imagine that means.

Part of that might reflect a bit of healthy tension – there may be some things in our lives that we enjoy...some comforts, some excesses...that we know don't quite square with the life of faith. It can be good to see and feel that dissonance – which is one way that God agitates us to change...even give up some things that better align our lives with God's intent for them.

Sometimes, though, another part of being intimidated and overwhelmed by the idea of following Jesus as a disciple is related to comparing ourselves to the All-Star-Team. You may have had that thought when I was talking about the Rev. Dr. King. We hear disciple and we think Billy Graham, or Mother Theresa, or Father Gregory Boyle. We consider what kind of impact those *real* disciples made and it leaves us wondering why we even try.

So, yeah, we'll come to church on occasion. And we'll try to make good choices. And we'll learn some things. And we'll help people. But following Jesus? Going all in? Committing to the level of being known as a disciple? There's no way we're cut out for that. We're just not good enough; there's no way we could make a difference.

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Our Scripture this morning tells the story of Jesus calling four of his disciples: Peter, Andrew, James and John. When you hear those names in the context of the Bible you might picture DaVinci's painting of the Last Supper and men in tunics sitting to the left and right of Jesus at table...if you grew up in the Roman Catholic or Orthodox Church, you might picture these men as saints. But when we meet them in today's Scripture, they really are just Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

The way the gospel of Matthew tells the story, when Jesus shows up by the Sea of Galilee it's not clear that people knew much about him yet. He was a newcomer to the region – a transplant from the tiny village of Nazareth a few miles north. He was known to be a teacher – but just in small circles. He had yet to recruit any disciples, but that was soon to change.

I've preached on this passage many times – and have sometimes been interested in just what a radical and – seemingly, impulsive – decision these four men make when they are issued Jesus's invitation. “Follow me,”

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Jesus said...and so they did! They dropped everything they had, immediately, and changed the course of their lives.

Today, though, I find myself interested in a different detail in the story.

It's related to that second part of what I read – **after** Peter, Andrew, James, and John had committed to a life of discipleship. Here it is again, in case you missed it:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

I wonder – once they began to realize just what big deal Jesus was and was going to be – able to perform miracles, attracting great crowds, fame spreading throughout the region...and with it, hope – when they saw all of this, I wonder if Peter, Andrew, James, and John might have gotten their heads together and had a little post-commitment freak-out “holy moly...I didn't know we signed up for **this!**” moment.

I have to think that – not just once – all of those newly minted disciples wondered if they had the chops for it.

And when they did wonder that, I hope they remembered exactly what Jesus asked them to do in his invitation to follow: Jesus asked the fishermen to fish.

He asked Peter, Andrew, James, and John to take what they knew...what they did well already...and employ **that** in the pursuit of spreading the good news of the gospel.

Jesus didn't ask the fishermen to make miracles.

He didn't ask the fishermen to build temples.

He didn't ask the fishermen to give speeches.

He asked the fishermen to fish.

“Follow me and I will make you fish for people...”

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About a month ago, I stood in this pulpit and gave thanks to God for Martha Mallory's life. Many of you knew Martha. She was a follower of Jesus...and she loved making people feel special and loved and like they had a place in this – her beloved church family. For 84 years, God used Martha's gifts of relationship-building and hospitality in the pursuit of sharing the good news of the gospel.

A little less than a month ago, I – again – stood in this pulpit and gave thanks to God for Renna Massey's life. Many of you knew Renna. She was a follower of Jesus...and she loved teaching children about the foundations of the Christian faith. There is a generation of people – no longer children...and many with children of their own – whose faith was shaped by Renna's classes. God used Renna's passion for teaching the catechism in pursuit of sharing the good news of the gospel.

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As I look out at you, I'm not sure you recognize it as discipleship, but I see God using your gifts, too. When you play the cello in worship. When you take your aptitude for construction on the road through local, regional, and international mission trips. When you bring your law-school-trained brain to help our preschool continue to adapt and thrive. When you bring your gifts for finance to bear in committee meetings. When you let your commitment to children extend beyond your own family and to the classrooms at Westerly Hills Elementary School.

You may think of that as *volunteering*. You may think of it as “*just doing your part.*” I would invite you to think about it differently: It is the work of discipleship. And it matters – and God uses it in pursuit of sharing the good news of the gospel in this place and well-beyond these walls.

In a few moments, I am going to invite those who have said yes to the call of being Elders and Deacons to come to the front of the sanctuary so that we can officially welcome you into the leadership of our church. And I know, because you've told me!, that some of you wonder if you are up to the task. You wonder if you know enough about the Bible to be considered an “officer.” You wonder if the fact that you haven't been a member of our church for years-upon-years somehow limits how effective you will be in helping to guide this congregation. You wonder if your real-world-experience will translate in your church-world-experience.

If you are sitting out there wondering that, just remember that Jesus told the fishermen to fish. And that – through the leading of the Holy Spirit – this congregation asked you to be a leader because of **who you are** and what gifts you bring.

This is the gift and grace of being a part of a church and not just having to make it on our own as an individual: God will use our *collective* work of discipleship in ways that will make an impact in spreading the good news of the gospel. When it comes to being the church of Jesus Christ, we do this together...we aren't on our own.

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