

Called into Community

By

The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Last Sunday we heard how John's Gospel remembers the Call of the Disciples as an invitational endeavor of inviting people to join the journey with Jesus using that gospel's refrain, "Come and see."

Today we have just heard Paul's admonition to the Corinthian church for Christian unity; and now we turn to the Gospel of Matthew's version of Jesus calling followers into a community. Listen for the word of God:

Matthew 4:12-23

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

¹⁸As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As 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. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³Jesus 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.

1 Cor. 1:10-18

¹⁰Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” ¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. ¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus called people who fished for a living, rather than some other kind of professionals? Remember these were not weekend, recreational sports-enthusiasts - the kind of anglers most of us know. Peter and Andrew had acquired knowledge and skill to work in a particular environment in order to make a living. James and John had learned from their father, Zebedee, how to make nets, mend nets, and throw nets in order to eat at the end of the day, to feed their family, to keep their homes, and pay their taxes. Have you ever wondered why Jesus chose commercial fishermen to be his first followers? After all, Jesus grew up the son of a carpenter, so why didn't he first call some other carpenters. He spoke their language; and could talk shop, so to speak. Or Jesus could have called some of the merchants down at the market who sold fruit and vegetables, housewares and cloth - tradesmen who had experience hawking their wares could have helped brand his new take on the old religion, or he could have called shepherds to gather congregations of sheep. Is there something about fishing that equips the called for discipleship?

There are two things actually that are different from other vocations. First, fishing is risky business. It is a vocation that involves real danger in ways that carpentry or selling a product or shepherding do not. Anyone who has ever seen the Fisherman's Memorial in Gloucester, Massachusetts, with over five thousand names of lives lost from that little fishing village alone have felt the danger of fishing. The unpredictability of changing weather patterns across open water makes fishing even today one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. The risk of a fisherman's life leads to the second, and perhaps the most telling aspect of why Jesus began calling people from the fishing business to be his first followers. Commercial fishermen cannot work alone.

Jesus begins calling disciples by asking pairs of brothers, so that ever after any one individual – say, Matthew the tax collector – is not called to follow alone, but called into a community already taking shape as a cooperative enterprise. Christian discipleship is never a solo endeavor. It is impossible to be a Christian all by yourself. It requires

community. One of the most remarkable archaeological finds in the Holy Land was the discovery of a boat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, found during a dry spell when the waters receded. With great care it was lifted out of the mud, cleaned, dated to the First century about the time Jesus was calling followers and is now preserved in a museum. The size of the boat is estimated to carry as many as five crew and ten passengers if used to ferry them. For the purposes of fishing, the discovery shows how fishing had to be a cooperative endeavor, for a boat that size required a crew.¹ Even those who fished from the shore, casting weighted nets required at least two people. Fishing in Jesus' day was risky and strenuous work, requiring skill, resilience, patience, and perseverance. It involved companions.

Likewise, today authentic Christian discipleship requires a community of mutual dedication and support. I suppose you can have a spiritual life defined by the religious practices of prayer, meditation and mindfulness, but you can never be a disciple of Jesus Christ by yourself. Discipleship began with Jesus gathering a community. Because American life today is suffering a crisis of isolation and loneliness, I think this passage of scripture is calling us to pay attention to how the church offers and nurtures a sense of community.

Recent sociological studies show that Americans are lonelier than ever before, and medical science shows that persistent loneliness is connected to higher risk of dementia, heart issues, and stroke. Other countries are also sounding the alarm on the crisis of isolation as a public health issue. In 2018 the United Kingdom gave the name to a new government position the Minister for Loneliness. Even before the isolation of the pandemic, on average, most adults have only two people they can talk to about the most important things in their lives. About twenty-five percent of the adults in our country, have no close confidants at all.

¹ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One*, p. 31.

A Duke University sociologist studying loneliness reports: “The kinds of connections we studied are the kinds of people you call on for social support, for real concrete help when you need it... Far too many people lack friends to share their lives with, their concerns about their health, or who will care for their children if something happens to them. Duke’s most recent studies on loneliness have probed more deeply into its causes, and one of the things they’ve discovered is that it’s not just a matter of spending time alone. On the surface the problem of loneliness may seem cut and dry – spend time by yourself, isolated, and you’ll start to feel lonely. But loneliness is actually much more complex than that. You can be surrounded by people all the time and still feel lonely.

Two things are needed, the Duke study says, in social relationships. First, that expectations for relationships meet reality. People have ideas in our heads about how our relationships with others *should* go, but reality doesn’t always match our expectations. When you call or text an old friend and get no response, loneliness results from a discrepancy between expected and actual social responses. The second key to understanding basic social requirements is people need in their lives others they can turn to for help, to share life experiences with and to trust. The research also found that a prolonged sense of loneliness typically peaks twice over a lifetime – among young adults and among senior adults. Interestingly, despite the age gap, young adults and senior adults have similar needs – the need to be listened to and respected, and the need to contribute and give back.²

Who can respond to these needs of both young adults and senior adults, better than the church? The church called to nurture a sense of community where people can turn toward one another for help, share life experiences and foster a culture of trust? The call of the church is to be a multi-generational community of people who follow Jesus together into

² Duke University, “What Causes Loneliness?”, Nov. 21, 2022.

the good work of God in the world. While loneliness is plaguing our culture and causing many social ills from physical and mental health issues to violence, it seems the church is already poised to be a community that can better meet those critical needs - for young adults, senior adults, youth and everyone in between. All we have to do is be trustworthy; available to help when we're needed; and be honest about our own life experiences so others will feel welcomed in sharing theirs. Some of us already do this so well, and still others are being called to help this congregation be a more hospitable and friendly community so that all of us are strengthened for the risky business of discipleship, and to live into our call to community.

I am currently reading Nina Totenberg's new book, *Dinners with Ruth: A Memoir on the Power of Friendships*. It is a winsome recollection of her long friendship with Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, but it's more than that. It's about the vital power of friendships when we are most in need. She writes about a whole circle of incredibly talented women who were ahead of their time breaking the glass ceilings in their careers in journalism and law, and how they needed each other for mutual help and support along the way in order to keep at the good work they were doing. The book is also a poignant testimony to the power of friendship during long seasons of illness and loss and grief.

Admittedly, some of Nina Totenberg's story feels a little surreal by the sheer fame of her friends. During her first husband's prolonged illness, she desperately needed a friend to accompany her to a doctor's appointment to make sure she would remember all the information from the doctor, so her friend Cokie Roberts went along to take notes. Obviously, not everyone has a prize-winning journalist to accompany a meeting with a doctor, but woven into almost every story about these founding mothers of National Public Radio, and their challenges of complicated careers and family life Totenberg talks about the importance of friends.

She was asked to give the commencement address at Washington and Lee University Law School and thought about how usually these speeches are about going out and conquering the world, but instead, she felt called to talk about friendship. She shared a couple of stories about the value of family and friends and admitted, “Yeah, yeah, everyone yammers about that... But,” she told those graduates, “most of you really haven’t had to confront some of your toughest blows life has to offer.” She talked about her husband’s fall on ice, three brain surgeries, months in the hospital... and how she managed by the help of her friends, saying: There is a lesson in the value of friendship... “It is a lesson that involves a rather old-fashioned word, duty. When you come to a crisis in life, you will find that doing your duty will serve you rather well, whether it is your crisis or someone else’s.” Doing your duty for others is a clear path, the choices few, and there are no regrets afterwards. Indeed, there are rewards. You are a better person... a deeper person and able to accept life’s blessings too.”³

Jesus calls us to a path of bold and risky discipleship to do all manner of Kingdom-building things. It is our duty. But we begin by joining a community. And we move forward by becoming a community of welcome for others. So that together, as friends in Christ, we get better at this work, we go deeper, and we serve more faithfully. It’s our call now, to go out there and become fishers of People.

AMEN.

³ Nina Totenberg, *Dinners with Ruth*, p. 93-94.

