



Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

January 22, 2017

New Testament Lesson
Gospel Lesson

Acts 9:1-6
Mark 1:14-20

Call

So, what did you want to be when you grew up? Forbes magazine compiled a list of the top ten jobs that six to eight year old boys and girls wanted to do when they were all grown up – 10 – Athlete (football player/dancer); 9 – firefighter; 8 – pop star; 7 – teacher; 6 – Zoo keeper; 5 – doctor; 4 – astronaut; 3 – vet; 2 – president; 1 – secret agent

So, how about us? I know for me, when I was really young, I wanted to be a scientist of some sort – mixing chemicals together in some weird lab or digging up worms and studying them. From the youngest age we start to think and wonder and dream about what to do with our lives. And of course very few of us end up doing those things. Life is about trying different paths, some we pick and sometimes our path is picked for us by the circumstances of life.

But when we do find that thing we do – that job we love, that uses our gifts and as a bonus uses our education we may remark to someone that we have found our calling.

And our jobs are a calling. I firmly believe that we are called to be a lawyer, banker, nurse, doctor, salesman, or a homemaker. But we have to remember that there is another calling on our hearts and lives. A larger calling. For God calls each of us to be light and salt shining love and seasoning the world with grace. We are called to be people of reconciliation and mercy, practicing forgiveness. We are called to be a people who live and practice the fruits of the spirit – people of joy, gentleness, patience, peace, goodness and faithfulness. And we are called to be a people of hope.

The problem comes in when we think God's call in our lives, is only for pastors or missionaries or for people like Mother Theresa and Billy Graham. We so often don't think God could possibly be calling us, but God is calling each of us this day to make a difference in the lives of others each and every day.

Our scripture reading today is all about this calling. Simon and Andrew were just ordinary fishermen casting their net into the sea. Day after day it was the

[Type here]

same thing; the same sea, the same net, the same boat. Day after day it was wind, water, fish, sore muscles, tired bodies. They probably grew up watching their dad and granddad fishing, watching their future life, watching how they too would spend their time.

Cast the net, pull it in. Cast the net, pull it in. If you are not casting the net, then you sit in the boat mending the net. That's what James and John were doing. Casting and mending. Casting and mending. You know about those days, right?

We may not fish for a living but we know about casting and mending nets. Days that all seem the same. One looks like another. Life is routine, lived on autopilot. Nothing changes. We don't expect much to happen. We cast the nets. We mend the nets. Casting and mending to make a living, to feed our family, to pay the bills. Casting and mending to gain security and get to retirement. Casting and mending to hold our family together, to make our marriage work, to grow up our children. Casting and mending to gain the things we want; a house, a car, books, clothes, a vacation. Casting and mending to earn a reputation, gain approval, establish status. Casting and mending our way through another day of loneliness, sadness, or illness.

Casting and mending are realities of life. They are also the circumstances in which Jesus comes to us, the context in which we hear the call to new life, and the place where we are changed and the ordinary becomes the extraordinary.

These would be disciples, Simon and Andrew, James and John, are not looking for Jesus. They are too busy with the nets. It is another day of casting and mending. They may not have even noticed Jesus but he not only sees them he speaks to them. Jesus has a way of showing up in the ordinary places of life and interrupting the daily routines of casting and mending nets. That's what he did to the lives of Simon and Andrew, James and John. That's what he does to your life and my life. "Follow me" is Jesus' invitation to a new life.

For when Jesus says, "I will make you fish for people," he is describing the transformation of their lives. He could just as easily have said to the carpenters, "Follow me, and you will build the kingdom of heaven." To the farmers, "Follow me, and you will grow God's people. To the doctors, "Follow me, and you will heal the brokenness of the world." To the teachers, "Follow me, and you will open minds and hearts to the presence of God." To the parents, "Follow me, and you will nurture new life."

[Type here]

Whatever your life is, however you spend your time, there is in that life Jesus' call to "Follow me." "Follow me" is the call to a larger vision, orienting our life in a new direction, and experiencing that our little story of life is connected to and a part of a much larger story of life, God's life.

Being called by God is about laying down your nets, your life, to serve God by loving people. You see, our calling to follow is all about letting our passions and our gifts and our abilities be used in a larger way. It is about being transformed to be a part of a larger work.

In John's Gospel we hear, "The person who trusts me will not only do what I'm doing but even greater things."

And we need to hear this day that in doing these greater things we don't always seize our call very often it is the call of God that seizes us. We don't know how much Simon or Andrew, James or John knew of Jesus – it is safe to say that they may have seen him preach or heard of his healings. And so when Jesus says to them – "Follow me" – it is as if a light switch is thrown – they were at the right place at the right time for the call of God to capture their hearts and lives to follow in his footsteps.

For this is what we see with Saul in our reading from Acts as we meet this man who was the single greatest persecutor of the early church personally overseeing the arrest and deaths of many of the earliest followers of Jesus. We meet him on the road to Damascus his heart full of "threats and murder" – ready to carry out more persecutions, when in a flash of light – A voice calls to him – Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me – Saul is stunned and confused when the voice says – I am Jesus who you are persecuting ... enter the city and you will be told what to do." In that moment, Saul was not looking for another calling - his direction was set – but Jesus interrupted with a call of such power and purpose that it touched and seized and transformed his heart sending him out – not as Saul the greatest church persecutor – but as Paul the greatest church planter and missionary spreading far and wide the message of love and hope and grace to transform the world.

This is the greater work – this is the call of God that captures our hearts transforming us and through us the world.

So, let me tell you about Ms. Thompson and Teddy. Ms. Thompson was an elementary school teacher who had a student one year called Teddy. And Teddy was a tough student. He didn't really talk, he was disengaged, he was disinterested,

[Type here]

and to top it off he could have a mean temper that landed him in the office and on detention more days than not. Ms. Thompson as much as she might not admit out loud just didn't have the patience or time or interest to really work with him, so he just fell further behind the class. So, she looked at her records on him - 1st grade - shows promise but has a bad home situation - 2nd grade - Teddy is a struggling - mother seriously ill - 3rd grade - teddy is too serious & show signs of trouble - mother died this year - father shows no interest in him- 4th grade - teddy is a deeply trouble boy and will most likely flunk out if nothing happens.

Christmas came around and the kids brought presents and in walked Teddy who put a paper bag wadded up by scotch tape on her desk. Ms. Thompson was shocked that he brought something. At recess she opened it and out fell a bottle of perfume half empty and a rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing. In that moment thinking of what she had read in his record, she paused, and then snapped the bracelet on and put some perfume on her wrists - showing it to the other kids as she came in. At the end of the day, Teddy came up slowly and said, "Ms. Thompson, you smell just like my mother and her bracelet looks really nice on you too, I'm glad you liked my presents." And in that moment time stopped and her heart fell - and like a light switch being flipped she made a silent commitment to this new calling - in that moment she dropped her net of seeing a child as a distraction - and she made a commitment to not just teach to impart information but to take a risk and make a difference in the lives of kids, especially those who are slow or difficult like Teddy. And so the next day she started tutoring him and by the end of year, he caught up to the rest of the class. Years later she got a note, "Dear Ms. Thompson, I'm graduating high school today and I'm 2nd in my class, I just thought you should know." And then a few years later, "Dear Ms. Thompson, they just told me I'm graduating from College and I'm 1st in my class. University was not easy but I really liked it." And a few years later, "Dear Ms. Thompson, I'm getting married soon and I would like for you to come and sit where my mother would have sat, you are the only family I have now. Daddy died last year." And she went and sat where Teddy's mother would have sat and she deserved it because she had answered the call to show love and care to a little boy who needed it - because she had done a greater work that would live on long after she was gone.

Because this is our greater work we are being called to this day - sharing God's love by continually connecting our faith with our life and those around us.

[Type here]

For our calling is to follow and be Jesus' hands, his heart, his instruments of his love to people who need to experience love. You know Jesus only needed 12 people that he could set on fire and through them the world was changed. And today, all he needs is us to do the same.

So often when we hear about doing a greater work we think of Jesus' miracles – but Jesus' miracles didn't last – he raised Lazarus – but Lazarus eventually died – he fed 5,000 but they were hungry the next day – he healed the sick and gave sight to the blind but eventually they aged. Only one miracle – the resurrection of Jesus Christ – is eternal. The greater work has nothing to do with miracles but everything to do with what does last – sharing the heart and love of God with those around us. It's God's love that transforms us and through us the world. When we let this love capture our hearts and let it open our eyes so that we don't see through another person – we see that person. So, that like Mrs. Thompson we don't see some troubled youth to write off – but a young man with potential who needs us to answer the call to show love.

I invite us this day to hear the call – “Come, follow me” and let it touch and capture our whole hearts. Because you have no idea how many people are put in your path to hear the good news of Jesus' forgiveness and love until you open your eyes to see them around you. People who are going through tough times and hard times and sad times and need to hear that hope is not gone, that peace is possible, that love is for all, and death is not the final answer. Let us really see the people struggling with addiction, struggling in relationships, struggling with being stressed, struggling with their families. Let us follow and be lights of hope. Let us follow and be that salt of peace. Let us follow and instruments of grace. Let us follow and show the heart of God's love. Let us follow and share our faith and hope in the Good News.

For Jesus is calling out to us this day by the side of the lake of life to follow him, to hear him say to us all, “I need you. I need you to walk with me and use what I've given you to share my grace and forgiveness in how you act, I need you to encourage those who are struggling with a letter, a phone call, a visit, I need you to work for justice and peace in your neighborhood, I need you to pray each day, I need you to share your love and faith with the people you meet.”

Jesus' call to follow is a powerful statement about just how important we are in this world. We are all useful no matter our age, our physical condition, no matter what is going on in our lives, we are useful because we are a child of God, because

[Type here]

Jesus died for us, because we don't need tremendous talents to make a difference in someone's life, all we need is a trusting faith where we tell another person and mean it, "Jesus loves you just as you are ... but he doesn't want to leave you there." Come lay down your nets and follow me to a new life.

So, let's hear that call of Christ today in our lives. That call to a deeper life. That call to a more meaningful life. That call to use all our passions and gifts to make a difference as we share God's love. That call to be involved in the most important life's work we could ever do, dedicated to something larger than ourselves. That call to follow and walk with him every day letting our hearts and lives be transformed. Amen.