

Follow Me

Matthew 4:12-23

January 26, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

Let me set a scene for you. You're in some sort of group meeting. Maybe a board or committee you're serving on, a team meeting at work, a club you're in, the parents' meeting for your kid's football team, the PTA meeting, or even the church Session meeting. The people are discussing a project or proposal, something that needs doing, and then the leader asks the dreaded question: "who would like to volunteer?"

And then the same thing happens in every single case. Every person looks down at their papers or their lap. Anything to avoid making eye contact with the leader. Like if we are very still and don't look up, they'll not see us sitting there. Those few moments last an eternity. Nobody wants to volunteer, for some reason, even if they're kind of interested in the task.

And if you've ever been the leader in this situation, those few moments last longer than an eternity. You thought the idea sounded good. You thought everyone in the room was excited about it. And so you made the split second decision to ask for a volunteer, and now everyone is staring at their own belly buttons.

So let's back up and try something different. The people are discussing the project or proposal, and the leader says, "Charlie Brown! You are really good at this type of thing. Would you be willing to head it up? And Linus and Lucy, you seem interested. Why don't the three of you get together and come up with a plan for this project?" And Charlie Brown and Linus and Lucy sit up a little straighter and say "sure."

What is the difference in the two approaches? Charlie Brown is equally good at the project in both scenarios. Linus and Lucy are equally interested in the project in each situation. But in the first, they stare at their hangnails or look off into the distance, and in the second, they are engaged and involved with the project right away.

The difference in the scenarios is, clearly, how the leader acts, how the leader leads, and how the leader sees them, and how well the leader knows them. In the first scenario, it could be that the leader doesn't really care *who* takes on the task, as long as it appears on someone else's to do list rather than their own. And so the people around the meeting table are sort of

interchangeable, not individually important. As long as *someone* takes on the task, the situation will be temporarily resolved, and the meeting can move on.

In the second situation, the leader knows the project well and knows the people around the table well. The leader has observed who is interested in the task and knows who will be a good leader for that task. By calling people by name, the leader demonstrates all this and affirms their interest and skills. And all of that is why they respond with a “yes,” as people almost inevitably do, when you ask them specifically to do something.

What I’m going to say next may be a little bit of a leap, but I think it’s something worth considering. I think John the Baptist was the kind of leader in the first scenario, and Jesus the leader in the second scenario. It’s not as if either of them would have been leading a committee meeting, but they both were leaders of people, and I think they led in ways similar to these committee meeting scenarios.

What makes the connection and contrast even more sharp is that, at least here in Matthew, their messages, their initial preaching, is exactly the same, word for word. Chapter 3, verse 1, John the Baptist says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Chapter 4, verse 17, Jesus says “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Exact same words, same message, different locations—but both outside of Jerusalem, different messengers.

John the Baptist went out and preached and people came to him. He was successful, in the role God had called him to perform, to prepare the way for Jesus. But John preached his message and waited for people to come to where he was and to hear his message of repentance.

Jesus, we see in this next chapter, begins in much the same way as John. He retreats from Jerusalem, out into what some people would think of as “the sticks,” and begins preaching the same message that John the Baptist preached. But instead of preaching and expecting people to volunteer to become his followers, Jesus starts moving around. He goes to where the people are, and he calls them by name. Simon and Andrew, I will make you fish for people. James and John, come on with us.

My analogy doesn’t work perfectly, but do you see the similarities between the leaders in the meetings and these two Biblical preachers? The first leader pitches the idea and waits for the volunteers to raise their hands, just like John the Baptist preached his message and waited for the crowds to repent and be baptized. Jesus pitches the same idea, and then goes out and recruits people, calls

them by name, just like the committee leader called Charlie Brown and Linus and Lucy, and they follow him.

Now I want to be clear that I'm not trying to insult or denigrate John the Baptist. He was doing exactly what he was called to do by God, and he was quite successful at it, successful enough for it to be threatening to the powers that be, successful enough to be dangerous, and he paid the consequences. It is his death that seems to provide the initiative for Jesus to begin his ministry after the temptation in the wilderness. John prepared the way for Jesus. It's just that Jesus takes a slightly different path.

Usually, when we read, or when I've preached on the story of Jesus calling the first disciples, the sermon tends to be about the disciples: how is that they could literally drop what they were doing, not look back at their father in the boat, and follow Jesus? How could they be so faithful? And how are we answering Jesus's invitation to follow him? I've preached several sermons like that, and those are definitely questions worth pondering.

But for this week, I started thinking about Jesus's leadership style here, which is probably not the right thing to call it, but I've struck out on finding just the right word. How is it that Jesus gets those four people to follow him? He just sees them, calls them by name, and they drop their nets and follow him. Well, I think that's it. It sounds simple, it sounds like their following him relies a whole lot on Jesus's charisma, and that's true too, but look carefully at what Jesus does here.

Jesus is walking around, out and about, among the people. He sees Simon and Andrew, sees them fishing, and calls them to follow him. "I'll make you fish for people." Or in the words of the committee chair, "Charlie Brown, I know you're good at this sort of thing. Will you head it up?" Jesus says to them, in effect, "I see that you're good fishermen. I'll teach you to fish in a new way." Jesus can see their gifts and skills and see how they can be used in his kingdom work, because the kingdom is near. And similarly with James and John, mending their nets.

What can we learn, as the church, as people who want to follow Jesus, and call other people to follow him alongside us. I think the church—not just our church, but the church in general—has been pretty comfortable for a long time with a John the Baptist kind of style. Not locusts and wild honey and camel's hair, but with his style of ministry and leadership. He set up camp, started preaching, and when people came to him, they heard what he had to say, repented, and were baptized. It worked for him. It worked for the church for a long time. We set

up camp, built buildings, and people came. They filled up Sunday school rooms, they overflowed sanctuaries, and basically the church just had to be there, be welcoming and friendly, and it all worked out quite nicely. One person was sort of interchangeable with the next, as long as people kept coming in.

But in recent years, really it's been a decades-long trend, long enough that we need to accept it as reality and not an anomaly, it's just not working that way, not working as well anyway. Sure, visitors come and are welcomed and hear the message and join in, but definitely not in the numbers of half a century ago.

So what if we changed our model away from John the Baptist's kind of model, away from the committee person asking if anyone wants to volunteer? I picture the church asking, sort of sadly, if anyone wants to come, and everyone else in town looking down at their paperwork, trying not to make eye contact.

What if we moved ourselves, and it's a giant shift, what if we moved ourselves more toward what Jesus was doing in this passage? Going out where the people are already, seeing them, figuring out what it is that makes them tick, calling them by name to join in what is happening in God's kingdom. This obviously takes a lot more work. It takes getting out to where the people are, here in Luling, in Caldwell County. Maybe that means attending events and frequenting places that aren't our usual haunts, places where maybe we're uncomfortable. It takes observing people and getting to know people, what they're interested in and what they're good at. And inviting them, clearly and openly, to come and use those skills and gifts for God's kingdom work.

Jesus walks with us as we work to make this change. Let's follow in his way.