

21 January 2024

Who Chose These Guys?

Mark 1:14-20

Last week we read the Gospel of John's account of how Peter and Andrew met Jesus. Today, a different account from the Gospel of Mark. We read chapter 1, verse 14-20.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Sit at desk.

"Come in, Mr. . . um . . . Simon? Is that right? Oh, good. We had another one of those a few minutes ago, so I wasn't sure I had the right paperwork. Please, sit down.

"Now, as I'm telling all the candidates, I'm just doing the first round of interviews for our disciple openings. Mr. Christ will interview the finalists himself. You should get word within two days if you'll be called back for that round. Today I just have a few standard questions for you, but first let me take a look at your application. Hmm. I see you're . . . you're *also* from Galilee. Huh. We've had several of those. Unusual. And your current position there is . . . oh, I see. Um, another fisherman. I see you're married and that your mother-in-law lives with you. We . . . we really didn't need that information, but . . . um . . . all right. Good luck.

"I don't see anything here about where you went to school. Ah, yes. Ha ha. I suppose we all learn the most in the school of hard knocks, don't we? But I meant more formal education. I see. Um, forgive me, but, ah . . . are you literate? That is a large word, isn't it? I meant, can you read? I see. Well, let's move on to practical experience then. Can you tell me about a time when you faced opposition to some professional goal from another person and what you did about it? That could work, yes. Did you consider any options other than knocking his teeth out?

"How about this? What would you say is your greatest strength? No, I'm sorry. I said *strength*. Oh. Well, it's just that some people might consider 'Saying whatever first pops into my head' to be *not* a strength. Uh-huh. I'm a little afraid to ask, but what would you say is your greatest weakness? Impulsive. Oh, well, color me surprised.

"Just one more question. Where do you see yourself in five years? Really? But . . . I'm sorry . . . isn't 'fishing' what you're doing now? I see. Well, I think that's all the time we have today. Thank you so much for coming in. Just leave that paperwork with the secretary on your way out and close the door."

Take out phone. "Joanna? Are there any more of them out there? Good. No, of course not! Where did this last batch even come from? He invited them? Seriously? Look, I'm not going

to be able to recommend any of them. Well, maybe that one. One of the Judases. Iscariot! That's right. That one seemed to have his head on straight. There's a man who believes in himself. But the rest of them? No, thank you."

When we consider the scriptures that tell how Jesus went about calling disciples, one of the details we should not overlook is how he *didn't* go about it. He was a teacher of scripture, but he didn't go to the rabbinical schools of Jerusalem. He had come to begin a revolutionary movement, but he didn't seek out experienced leaders. Instead he chose fishermen, political radicals, provincials, former Roman collaborators, basically anyone whose resume was covered with red flags. Why is that? I mean, to be fair, it seems to have worked. Those potential employment disasters ended up changing the world. But why did he choose *them*?

Before dealing with that, though, I should note one thing. God does the same thing in the Old Testament. He invariably chooses the least likely candidate. Father of a nation? Let's choose a childless octogenarian nomadic shepherd. God's spokesman to the Egyptian pharaoh, the greatest king on earth? Let's send the stutterer. Need a general to lead Israel against the Midianites? Oh, look! There's Gideon hiding in a dry cistern because he's afraid of the Midianites. He looks promising. Need someone to stand up and proclaim an unwelcome message to kings and people who will never believe a word of it for a quarter of a century? Hmm. We need someone who really hates confrontation and has a tendency toward depression. Jeremiah! Perfect! Throughout the Bible, in both testaments, God chooses servants from the "fails to meet minimum qualifications" folder. And since this is a consistent pattern, we have to conclude that it's intentional. God simply is not looking at the same qualifications that we would. So what *is* God looking for?

The first thing is simple. *They were people who said yes.* What do all the disciples have in common? Jesus called them, and they came. He called Simon and Andrew and *immediately they left their nets and followed him.* He called Matthew the tax collector, and he stood up from the tax table, left the money, and followed. Even before that, when God called Mary to be the mother of Jesus, the angel called her and she said "I am the handmaiden of the Lord." I sometimes wonder about the calling of Mary, actually. Did God use his eternal advance knowledge to choose the exactly the right person – which is the usual assumption (Get it? Assumption? See what I did there?) – or did God send Gabriel around to ask women all over Judea until he found the one who said, "Let it be as the Lord commands"? Was Mary chosen from the dawn of time? Or was her being chosen dependent on her free choice to say yes? In fact, for all we know, Jesus had said "Follow me" to hundreds of people in Galilee, but these fishermen were the first who dropped their nets and followed.

And that's the second thing. *They were willing to drop their lives.* These are people with families, with jobs, with responsibilities, but they were willing to chuck it all to follow Jesus. This may, in fact, help to explain why Jesus' original disciples all seemed to be from the poorer classes. If you don't have very much, maybe it's easier to chuck it. But it's more than that. My own feeling is that you don't give up what you have, even if it's not much, unless you've already begun to wonder if it was worth having. As many of you know, I serve on the Board of Ordained Ministry, in which capacity I have read dozens of calling stories. One of the repeated themes in those accounts is that at some point these people now seeking to go into ministry grew dissatisfied with their lives – began to question whether this was really all that there was for

them. Sometimes it started with a massive disruption – a death, a divorce, a failed business – and other times it was just a growing sense of living only a partial life, that they were supposed to do more. When I think about the calling Matthew the tax-collector, I imagine him sitting day after day at his tax table being hated by the Jews, used by the Romans, and despising himself. When Jesus looked him in the eye and said, “Follow me,” he didn’t have to think for a second. He dropped it all and ran after Jesus.

One more qualification. *The people who followed Jesus were willing to change.* Now this one isn’t so obvious from the story of the disciples’ calling, because that story only tells about the people that Jesus started with, but from that point on, their story is breathtaking. Take Simon Peter, who was being interviewed by HR at the beginning of this sermon. A more unpromising candidate for ministry can hardly be imagined. No way that guy’s getting through the Board that I serve on. And yet, look who he became. One of the most influential figures in world history. As the leader of the earliest church, he not only held them together but he led them in revolutionary new directions, eventually leading the church in what was considered the center of the universe, Rome, from which Christianity spread throughout the world. That Peter bears no resemblance to the Simon Jesus called away from the nets that day. He was able to change – or rather, to *be* changed – and that, more than anything else, is what Jesus is looking for in his disciples.

By the way, according to Early Church tradition, when Peter was in Rome he had a personal secretary, a former colleague of Paul’s named Mark – the one who wrote our scripture today. Now some people question whether Mark really wrote this gospel, and one of the reasons that has been given is that in the Gospel of Mark, Peter is presented as something of a buffoon, a man who lives with his foot in his mouth, who seems to be all bluster. Mark would never portray his friend and mentor Peter in such a negative light, people have argued. Yes he would. Of course he would! Because Mark gets it! Jesus isn’t interested in how great people are; Jesus is interested in whether they can change. Mark’s gospel is saying, “You know Peter, right? The leader of the church? Yeah, well this is who he used to be. Think about that.”

Now I’ve talked about the great apostle that Peter became and I’ve used examples from people who feel called to ordained ministry, but I need to back off that line of thought for now, because our scripture today is not about people being called to ministry. It’s about people being called to be disciples: learners, followers. And that’s all of us. “Disciple” is the entry-level position for followers of Christ. How far we progress from that entry-level position depends on three things: Are we willing to say yes? How much are we willing to lay down? And how far are we prepared to be changed?