

First Presbyterian Church
Marianna, Florida
January 20, 2008
Sermon by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Scripture Readings: Matthew 4: 12-17

Matthew 4:18-22

Sermon Title: "Hearing Our Call to be Followers of Jesus"

Sermon Text: Matthew 4: 18-20: As 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. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Last Friday morning as Jim Gibbs, our Clerk of the Session, Betty Blighton, our Church Secretary and I were looking at our Church Register and completing the Statistical Report for the Presbytery for 2007 I was reminded of a story I heard several years ago of a church that on December 31 each year destroyed its church roll and register. What this meant was that anyone who wanted to be considered as a member of that church in the next year had to again request that his or her name be placed on the church roll. For those of you who may be getting concerned, as far as I am aware our Session has no plans to take such drastic action any time soon.

The action of that congregation, though, does remind us that our decision to follow Jesus and to seek to serve him as the Head of the Church is not a decision that we can make just once in our lifetimes. If following Jesus and being a member

of his church is to have any meaning for us then it is a decision that we are forced to make over and over again in our lives.

I do not know about you but I am not sure what prompted Peter and Andrew, John and James to respond as they did to the invitation of Jesus to follow him. What is clear in the words we have just heard, though, is that in response to the invitation of Jesus, "Follow me," they immediately left what they were doing as fishermen on the Sea of Galilee to follow Jesus. We may not know what it was about this Jesus that caused such an immediate and life-changing response from these four men. One thing that we do know is that they did not immediately appreciate all that it would mean to follow him. We know from later in Matthew's Gospel, and all the Gospels, that when Jesus began to share with them what it would mean for him to be the long-expected Messiah in terms of suffering and death they were not ready to accept that this would be the way he would choose to show God's love for the world. Indeed, on one occasion Jesus even pointed out to them that many who had been following him were no longer doing so. Maybe they had turned away as they had found out what it took to enter the kingdom of heaven of which Jesus spoke, or maybe as they had heard Jesus say whom God would want to include in such a kingdom they decided they wanted no part of it. As others who had been following him turned away Jesus also gave all twelve of the disciples the opportunity to leave as well if they wished to do so. That experience reminds us that even for them after making such an immediate decision to follow Jesus it was not a decision they could make just once in their lives. Not once but constantly, especially as the opposition to him mounted, they had to be asking themselves, "Do I still want to follow this Jesus?"

What was their experience is also our experience. The decision to follow Jesus is not one that we make once and for all on one occasion in our lives. If being a follower of Jesus is going to be at all meaningful in our daily lives then it is a decision that we have to be making over and over again. As we remember the

experience of those disciples we remember that it also has been part of our experience. How many people have each of us known over the years who were so enthusiastic about being followers of Jesus and so faithful in their attendance at church, but now we never see them darken the doors of the church? How many people who have professed their faith in Jesus even before this congregation do we know who would now claim the name of Jesus, only to use it to curse and swear?

We are here today not because we heard that invitation of Jesus to follow him once long ago and responded to it. We are here because even this morning we have heard his call and have made the conscious decision to follow him. Our being here is our way of saying that if this congregation, or any other congregation of which we are a part, made up a new membership roll each year then we would want to be counted on it for this new year of 2008.

One of the great privileges I have as a pastor is that of hearing other people tell their stories of what it has meant in their lives to be the followers of Jesus and members of the Church. Within the Presbyterian Church we are not big on testimony meetings and on giving people an opportunity to share their stories. One occasion that has been most moving for me almost every year is when I meet with our new elders and as part of our church officer development class I invite them to share something of their own religious experience and how they have come to respond at this time to the call of Jesus to serve as an elder in this church. For three of our new elders this morning they will be ordained to office since this will be the first time that they have served as elders in a Presbyterian Church. I know from what they have shared of the variety of their family and church backgrounds they would say that being an elder in a Presbyterian Church in Marianna, Florida is not something that they would have anticipated the first time that they said, "I want to follow Jesus and I want to be a member of the Church, the Body of Christ." Yet each of them has affirmed before our Session that this is what they believe God is calling them to do at this present time in the life of this congregation.

Their experience reminds us of that of Peter and Andrew and John and James. If a newspaper reporter had been there by the Sea of Galilee as they left their boats to follow Jesus and had asked them what are you going to do and what is going to happen to you as you follow this Jesus I doubt that anyone of them would have been able to give anything of an exact description of all that was going to be involved for them to be the followers of Jesus Christ.

Their experience reminds us that if being a follower of Jesus is to be a meaningful thing in our lives not only do we need on a continuing basis to make that conscious decision to follow him, but we need also to be asking, “What is Jesus calling me to do for him as his follower, and as a member of his church, at the present time?” The testimony of so many over the years has been that their own experience of what it means to be a follower of Jesus has grown and has been enhanced not as they have simply done what they have always done before, but as they have been open to the new opportunities for witness, and to the new possibilities for service to which Jesus may be calling them at different times in their lives. As our new elders affirm the call of Jesus to serve as elders in this congregation at this time I feel sure that they would to invite all of us to look at our own lives and to ask, “What is it that I should be doing in this new year as a follower of Jesus?” What it means for us to be followers of Jesus can be alive and vibrant in our lives only as we are ready not once, but over and over again to ask and to answer such questions for ourselves.

We may be able only to speculate about what prompted Peter and Andrew and John and James to make such an immediate response to the invitation of Jesus to follow him. Today, though, what they did prompts us to reflect on our own experiences and our own responses to the invitation of Jesus to follow him. We are invited to continue to reflect on their responses, and to think about our own ongoing responses to the invitation of Jesus as we join in a hymn which was written in 1979 after the writer had made a visit to the Sea of Galilee and was

moved by the experience of being at the seaside where some of the disciples had been called. (*The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion, page 263*) His hymn, “Lord, you have come to the Lakeshore,” is found at No. 377.

1. You have come up to the lakeshore, looking neither for wise nor wealthy.
You only wanted that I should follow.

Refrain:

O Lord, with Your eyes You have searched me,
And, while smiling, have called out my name.
Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me,
Now with You I will seek other seas.

2. You know that I own so little, in my boat there's no money nor weapons,
You'll only find there my nets and labor.
(Refrain)

3. You need the caring of my hands. Through my tiredness, may others find
resting. You need a love that just goes on loving.
(Refrain)

4. You, who have fished other oceans, Ever longed for by souls that are waiting,
My dear and good friend, as thus You call me.
(Refrain)

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