

Seen and Called
Matthew 4.12-23
Sunday, January 26, 2014
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He had more money than he knew what to do with, yet he got dressed that morning ready to go out and make some more. Make some more or take some more; he didn't really know what to think at this point, and he was too far in to let his guilty conscience get the best of him now. Sure, he was lonely. No one wanted to spend a lot of time with the slick talking tax collector. He had the respect of his superiors at work, but the dinner table was a quiet place that he dreaded at day's end. He shook these thoughts away as he grabbed his bag to walk out the door. Then he heard people talking about the teacher coming to town as he walked through the busy streets.

That guy was getting a lot of good press lately. Everyone wanted to hear him teach, and rumor had it that he even performed miracles. Bunch of holy rollers, all of 'em. But maybe...maybe this guy would be good for a laugh. Or if he's half as good a speaker as people made him out to be, then taking a detour to listen for a bit would be entertaining.

So he made a few stops along his morning route to gather the taxes and his fair share, then he wandered over to where the crowd had gathered. Turns out he wasn't the only one with that bright idea, so he outsmarted them all, as he always did, and found a quiet spot in a tree. After all, he was used to hiding in a crowd and spending awkward time alone. But he wasn't prepared for the way Jesus taught, the way his voice lilted and warmed the space around him. And he almost fell out of the tree as Jesus looked eyes with him and walked straight through the crowd to where Zaccheus sat. "He sees me," Zaccheus realized. "He sees me and he knows."

She'd been bleeding for...gosh, hard to remember now...for years. It didn't matter why. The rules were the rules, and her story didn't matter to the officials. As long as the blood continued, she had to stay home, stay away, stay hidden. "Unclean," they all said. But she didn't feel unclean, she felt tired. And lonely, and done. Done! with the judgment and the sideways glances. Done with praying the prayers by herself in her quiet house, done with keeping a respectful distance. Done with grieving the husband who left and the friends who didn't check in nearly enough. Done with watching the happy mothers and their healthy babies as her body seemed to turn against her and mock her as child after child was born without complication. This was no life.

But she wasn't feeling sorry for herself that day, she was feeling determined—over it all, over the isolation and the rules, over the frustration and the sadness. She had heard that the young rabbi was coming through, and she knew he was her last hope and last chance.

The crowd was thick, and she slipped in unnoticed. He was talking up a storm, surrounded by a group of men all chatting and listening, questioning and discussing. She slowly edged forward, uncertain of her plan. Would she interrupt? Ask for a blessing? Beg for help? Did she want him to pray for her or name her ailment to prescribe a cure? There was no time, and she had no hope of getting him away from the eager ones who traveled with him. She just kept getting closer, drawn to the sound of his voice and the grace of his smile. Before she knew it, she reached through a gap in between bodies and caught the corner of his prayer shawl. She was wholly unprepared for the moment when he locked eyes with her. "Who touched me," he asked. But he knew. He knew as he looked into her eyes and saw her. He knew even as she stepped forward to confess her boldness. He just kept staring into her eyes until he spoke, "Daughter, you're healed. Peace."

It was a gorgeous day to be on the water—the breeze was coming in at just the right angle, the sun was close enough to make the splash of water feel good but not so hot to make the work day too hard. The men were thankful for the beauty of another morning on the water as they started getting ready for the day. Two brothers whistled and moved effortlessly around one another as they sorted the day's supplies, unlocked cabinets, and untied their boat. They felt ready for the full day ahead. Just down the way was Zeb and his sons. He was showing them, again, how his method of repairing nets was better than anyone else's. They dutifully watched, listened, and then showed him how well they'd learned.

Not one of them was ready for what happened next. It had been years since they'd even considered life with a rabbi. They had given up on that idea and headed straight back to their fathers' work—good work, hard work, honest work. They were good at it, and the water life was in them from their earliest memories—the sound of birds circling overhead, the feel of the water on your skin and in your hair, the pull of a good catch. They were fishermen for generations, they knew that life well, and they were proud to follow their fathers' vocations.

But they had heard about this rabbi, they knew about the healings that happened when he was near. People who came to hear him teach left with bellies full of fish and bread. They knew who he was but never once thought that he would know them, recognize them, see them, much less approach them and call them out. But he didn't just stop and

say hello, he invited them to follow him—to travel with him, study with him, take on his instructions and teachings. “Come and follow me!” So of course they dropped everything (immediately!) and followed him. It was an invitation surely meant for someone else, but they weren’t going to turn it down.



Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
the 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.’
From that time Jesus began to proclaim,
‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—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. As 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus 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.



It was about six years ago when I first heard a preacher explain the first century process of Jewish theological education.* Most Jewish children would go to school around the age of 6 to learn the Torah. Classes would probably be held in the local synagogue and be taught by a local Torah teacher who was a rabbi. This first level of education lasted until the kid was around 10 years old. In this first level, children were expected to memorize the Torah and learn it by heart. Every word—Genesis through Deuteronomy—memorized.

By the end of this first level, most children were exiting the program and going on to learn the family trade. But the best would keep going and continue their education into the next level. In this second tier of education, the students were expected to memorize the rest of the Hebrew scriptures. That's all of our Old Testament, memorized. By the end of this second level of schooling, around the age of 14 or 15, another wave of children exits the training track and turns back to their family for learning a trade or the family business.

But the best of the best of the best would continue onto the third level. At this point, these excellent students of Hebrew Scripture would go to a rabbi and apply to that rabbi to become one of that rabbi's disciples. This isn't just about students learning information from teachers. A disciple, in this context, studies with a rabbi not just to know what the rabbi knows but to be like the rabbi, and these student disciples want to learn to do what the rabbi does.

The students would go to the rabbi and enter into a period of lengthy questioning as the teacher determined if the student was capable of taking on the rabbi's particular understanding and interpretation of the scriptures. At this point, some students were still sent home to learn the family trade and not chosen to be disciples.

But if the rabbi sensed that the student was smart enough and capable of the rigors of discipleship, well versed both in scripture and in the teachings of scripture, then the rabbi would say, "Come, follow me." And at that point, the student would apprentice beneath the rabbi—to learn his teaching of scripture, to learn to do the things the rabbi does, to learn to be like the teacher.

By around the age of 30, those who had passed through these years of process, schooling, study, apprenticeship, they would begin their teaching as rabbis.

We have this calling scene before us in Matthew today (and there are similar ones in Luke and Mark). Jesus approaches two sets of brothers, both fishermen. As a child in the church, I was always taught that there must have been something amazingly compelling about Jesus' presence for fishermen to walk away from their boats and follow Jesus immediately, as Matthew reports. Jesus wanted to gather ordinary folks around him from all walks of life, and he picked and chose those who were willing to drop everything to follow him. And maybe that's all there is to it.

But consider this idea of disciples being chosen by rabbis after they successfully passed through years of schooling. If disciples were to be only those who proved themselves as the best, then it follows that Jesus is going outside the process. If he approaches these

brothers and says, “Come, follow me.” Then they aren’t already following another rabbi. They aren’t the best of the best.

Jesus approaches them in the middle of their day, busy at their trade, and he invites them to follow him. He sees them where they are and calls them to follow. He sees that they can do what he does. He sees them and says, “You can be like me.”

Teacher and writer Rob Bell points out, “Jesus chooses them because his movement is for everybody. For rich and for poor, for women and men, educated and uneducated. Jesus calls them—the JV, the B team, the not-good-enoughs.” He calls them to be his disciples, and they make history.

We know some of this about Jesus already. We know that he was drawn to those who were not heard within religious and political power structures. We know that the abandoned and forgotten of society were also just as drawn to him. We know that he saw people with a depth and awareness that we both crave and fear. We want to be fully seen and known but are terrified that we’ll be found out for who we really are.

In Rob Bell’s study of this text, I find a question that changes the way I hear these call stories. Bell continues, “All my life I’ve heard people talk about believing in God. But God believes in us. Faith in Jesus is important, but what about Jesus’ faith in us? I mean he must have faith in us because he leaves [his teaching and ministry] all in the hands of these disciples.”

What does it mean to believe in a God who doesn’t just see us and know us but also believes in us?

“What if this is true? What if we can actually be the kinds of people that God created us to be? What if God really sees us now—completely as we are—and really believes we can be the kind of people who live like Jesus lived? The kind of people who take action because we’re aware of the endless opportunities around us all the time—opportunities for good, for beauty, for truth.”

The stories in scripture that engage us the most are the ones of God seeing flawed, honest people in the ordinariness of a day, the pain of a lifetime, or the darkness of a night, and God calls out to them. These stories tell us our own and they whisper to us the hope that God believes in us. The loneliness and boredom, the grief and despair, the feeling of being not-good-enough is in our story, too. The good news of scripture is that God sees us right here in this moment, is present with us, and calls out to us, inviting us onto God’s Way because God believes we can live into that goodness.



They were ordinary people. A variety of people that may not always end up around the same dinner table, and Lord knows they didn't always agree, but something kept bringing them back to that place. They were young and old and in-between. There were the artists, the thespians, the musicians, and the ministers—so many ministers. The electricians, the scientists, the teachers, and the attorneys—so many attorneys. Some walked in off of the street out of curiosity, others out of habit, and many because it was the only place they might ever hope to feel at home.

They smiled and drank coffee, they hugged and whispered peace, they prayed their prayers and heard the music swell until they thought they might not catch their breath. And they realized that something happened there as they climbed up those old stairs and sat in those old pews and looked deeply into each other's eyes; something bigger than them and truer than they dared speak out loud. Something was calling them to Life.

They kept showing up and slowly told the truth about their lives. They gave themselves to each other and to God. They lived into the fullness of who they were created to be: people of love and compassion and truth. People of forgiveness, and peace, and grace, and joy, and hope. People who embrace their call to follow Jesus, to live as his disciples. And together, they began to move so closely into his teaching and living that they become like him for the sake of the world.

Amen.



**Most of today's teaching about Torah studies and the first century process of calling disciples comes from a lecture I heard Rob Bell give in 2008. Direct quotes and abridged information can be found in his Nooma: Dust 008 video either at nooma.com or on YouTube. Rob Bell was teaching pastor at Mars Hill Church in Michigan at the time of this teaching. He now lives in California where he writes and teaches. You can find more of his work at robbell.com.*