

3rd Sunday of after the Epiphany (Year A) – Matthew 4:12-23
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

Co-creating God's New Community

Today's Gospel reading is not your typical call story. Certainly it sounds familiar because we heard a similar version from John last week. But most of the call stories that I have heard outside of New Testament narratives are not so immediate. They convey more of an unfolding process.

I first sensed God calling me to ordained ministry around the turn of the millennium. And then, I spent the next decade resisting that call by exploring just about every other ministry in the church. Fortunately there were several role models to inspire me and mentors to guide me along the way. Many, but not all of them, were women. One of them, Rev. Rhonda, was the first woman priest to serve at the Cathedral in Albuquerque. When I finally found the courage to share my sense of call, I shared it with her. I was quite relieved that she didn't laugh at me or try to persuade me to do something else. She sat with me, listened patiently, and then encouraged me to seek the guidance of a spiritual director.

Some of you know that one of the first steps on the path toward ordination is to gather over several months with a parish discernment committee. Although I had served at the Cathedral for nearly two decades, I sensed that I wanted to discern my call in a more contemplative environment.

So I transferred my membership to a smaller parish that happened to be led by a female rector. Rev. Carole was not the only reason why I chose to discern my call with St. Thomas of Canterbury. I was attracted to St. Thomas because of their commitment to partner with other religious organizations in serving the needs and concerns of the wider community. My sponsoring parish was one of the founding congregations that helped establish St. Martin's Hospitality Center - a non-profit organization that provides a full range of critical services for homeless people, including hosting breakfast and worship services, and offering pastoral care.

On Sundays, I served as a lay leader first at St. Martin's and then at St. Thomas. On one of my first Sundays at St. Martin's, I assisted Chaplain Susan as a Eucharistic Minister. After the worship service, she suggested that I sit down with the guests and share breakfast with them. I asked her what I was supposed to talk about. She wisely advised me that it was more important that I listen and be with people than talk about anything in particular. Over time, I learned that some people wanted to talk more than others. I learned that I shouldn't have any expectations for conversation topics. The most important thing I could do was be with people and meet where they were - on that particular morning, and at that particular moment in our shared lives. In meeting people where they were, I was pleasantly surprised that they met me where I was. Our encounter wasn't about me trying to help them or fix their

lives. It was about being with each other and getting to know each other as human beings. It was about finding commonality in life's ups and downs, and accepting each other just the way we were.

Meeting people where they are and accepting them the way they are; acknowledging their particular wisdom, skills, and interests; and proclaiming the Good News along our shared journey -- this is the model of Jesus' ministry that Matthew's Gospel conveys for us today. As Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee at the beginning of his public ministry, he invites ordinary people into an extraordinary way of life. He doesn't choose people with the most power and authority. He doesn't ask a list of pre-qualification questions. He simply says, "Follow me." He tells the fishermen, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Follow me and you will be able to use your particular knowledge and skills and apply them in new ways. Ways that will transform your life and the lives of all you encounter. What an amazing proclamation!

What's even more amazing is that the two sets of brothers drop everything -- they leave their livelihoods and their families -- all that they knew and loved, and stepped into an unknown future. They didn't take anything with them. They didn't ask, "Why me?" They didn't even stop to consider what it is they were about to do. They just dropped everything and followed this amazing person whom they had heard so much about from John the Baptist and their Galilean neighbors.

What was it that attracted the first followers of Jesus to risk everything and trust in him and his way of life? Certainly, it's easy to feel empowered when someone accepts you for who you are and reassures you that you're a beloved person with intrinsic value -- especially when those with power and authority normally ignore you or treat you with disdain. Fishermen were not the most respected or appreciated members of society -- especially by leaders of the Roman occupation. Fishermen were just another part of the imperial economy that was geared toward benefitting the upper echelon. The vast majority (70-90%) of the common people survived at subsistence level under Roman imperial structures. They lived at varying degrees of poverty resulting in poor nutrition, widespread disease, and early mortality. Life under the Roman Administration was perilous for most. And then Jesus showed up.

Jesus wasn't the first prophet to proclaim a more humane and spiritually enriching way of life. His cousin John also noticed that social and religious structures weren't creating the kind of world that God intends for all; that systems of injustice were being built up to overshadow the kind of kingdom that the Messiah would manifest. When Jesus came on the scene, he brought hope and healing among the people. He embodied the prophetic words of Isaiah:

"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."

Jesus was and is the light in our darkness - the darkness of our minds, the darkness of our hearts, the darkness of our world. He is the supreme example of meeting us where we are, and loving us as we are, and encouraging us to repent, or shift our focus - and renew our relationship with God and God's purpose for all people and all creation. Jesus - the Incarnate One - chose to be with humanity; he chose to be among us in all the messiness and wondrous joys of our lives. He inspires us to respond to the sparks of light that reawaken our hearts and not give in to the voices that tell us we are not good enough, or that our opinions don't matter, or that our skin isn't the right color, or our gender doesn't fit the limitations of socially-defined constructs. Jesus comes to be with us every day. And he says, "Follow me." Follow me and you will shine God's light for anyone who sits in darkness. Follow me and be empowered to serve as God's agents in manifesting the kingdom of heaven - God's new community -- right here, right now. You and I are called personally and collectively to be the light in the darkness; to share Christ's light in the world. Jesus doesn't call us just once. Jesus calls us again and again to follow him and bring healing and hope wherever we are. How is Jesus calling you today? How are you following him and helping create the new community that God intends for all?

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