

Encounters with Jesus in Matthew: The Call

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

January 8, 2023 AM Sermon

Matthew 4:18-22

Reverend Peter Jonker

This morning we start a new sermon series. For the Epiphany season of the church year, that's a season that goes from the end of Christmas to the beginning of Lent, we will be looking at encounters with Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. When you read through the gospel of Matthew, you hear story after story of people who come into contact with Jesus. People from different social backgrounds, people from different economic backgrounds, hostile people, desperate people - people from all walks of life. All these folk are impacted by their encounter, sometimes the encounter is healing, sometimes the encounter produces conflict, in every case the encounter is revelatory. In every case, we learn something about Jesus and what his coming means for human beings and means for the world.

Today's first encounter is towards the beginning of the gospel, at the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus is taking a stroll around the sea of Galilee in the afternoon sunshine when he runs into some young fishermen who are just going about their daily lives, and he calls them to be his disciples. Read Matthew 4:18-22

Over the last 40 years or so there has been a big change in the way people relate to the church and church membership. It's a change that had already begun when I started ministry back in the 90's, and I've seen it grow over the years. Increasingly people treat the church like a service provider. People see the church as similar to other businesses and institutions that they interact with, an institution that provides a service.

In that sense, in many people's eyes, the church is not that different from a Starbucks, or your local chiropractor's office. Your local chiropractor and your neighborhood Starbucks are useful, appreciated businesses that provide an important service, and when you need that service, you engage. If you have joint problems, you call your chiropractor and make an appointment. And you're really glad for his skill. If you have the hankering for a peppermint spice latte on a Friday morning, you head over to Starbucks, you give the barista your \$4.50, and you go on your merry way. But if your joints are fine, if you are loose and limber, you don't go to your chiropractor. Frankly you don't think about him. And if you're not in the mood for a coffee based beverage, you don't go to Starbucks. You spend your day doing other things and thinking about other things.

In the same way, the church provides spiritual food and spiritual help. In life, you are going to go through things that raise spiritual questions and spiritual feelings. Maybe you've just lost a loved one, or maybe you had your first baby, or maybe life has been feeling a little routine and you're looking for a whiff of transcendence, well, you can come to church. Visit a service. Set up a meeting with a pastor. Sample a program. Partake of one of the array of our spiritual products and see if we can't help you with your problem. That's how lots of people think of us: Starbucks sells coffee, chiropractors sell joint relief, the church sells spiritual help.

Here's how Dutch missiologist Stephan Paas describes it: "In Europe as well as in America, a new pattern is gradually emerging: that is a shift away from understanding religion as a form of obligation, and towards an increasing emphasis on consumption and choice."

Whatever you think of this trend, and you can probably tell that I'm not a fan, there have always been people who've treated Christianity this way. You saw it in Jesus' time. This was essentially the posture of the crowds who followed Jesus everywhere. The passage right after ours shows that posture. Verse 24: "News about Jesus spread all over Syria and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases...large crowds...followed him." The people in those crowds were in a consumer posture. They had a sick relative and they heard there was a Spiritual man in town named Jesus who could help you with such things. So they put Uncle Fred in his wheelchair, they wheeled him down to the village green, and they got in line to see Jesus. Once the healing was over they thanked Jesus with tears of gratitude, but then they took Uncle Fred back home. The next morning, they went back to work, a satisfied customer. They really appreciated what Jesus did for them, but there was no real change to their life and its routines.

There have always been large number of people, perhaps the majority of people, who have this crowd/customer relationship with Jesus.

How does Jesus feel about these people? Jesus loves the crowds, and he responds to them, he has compassion on them, he heals them. Jesus doesn't cast aside people who approach him like a customer. But it's not the heart of what Jesus wants. Jesus accepts and loves the crowd, but Jesus doesn't want a crowd, he wants a community. And in that community he doesn't want customers, he wants disciples. Not a crowd; a community. Not customers; disciples.

Today's sermon, and I suppose maybe this whole sermon series, is orbiting around that difference between a crowd and a community, between a customer and a disciple. I want to refresh our call to discipleship; to encounter Jesus and in that encounter to hear him calling you to more than a casual customer relationship with him. To hear Jesus calling you to something better, something deeper. In some ways, my goal in this series is for you to see Jesus coming down to your seashore and calling you to be his disciple.

What sort of call is this and how is it different from the crowd/customer relationship?

For a disciple, the master – in our case Jesus – becomes the organizing principle of their life.

The crowd does not change its life after meeting Jesus. Uncle Frank gets cured. That's wonderful! But the next day its back to the old life with its plans and priorities and passions. "Thank you Jesus for services rendered, but now, if you don't mind I have some work to do." Disciples do not go back to their regular life. Customers want Jesus to help them with their plans, priorities and passions. Disciples submit their plans, priorities and passions to Jesus and ask him to renovate them. "Lord, give me your passions, your plans, your priorities." Peter and Andrew leave their nets on the shore and follow Jesus. James and John leave their nets and their father. Jesus becomes the organizing principle of their life. Their priorities, plans and passions are re-centered around Jesus.

That doesn't mean that if you want to be a true disciple of Jesus you must leave your job, but it does mean that every aspect of your job and the way you do it becomes re-centered around your master. This story doesn't mean that everyone who follows Jesus needs to walk away from a parent and leave them in the boat to fend for themselves, but it does mean that every family relationship and family priority is governed by your relationship with Christ. Being a disciple doesn't always mean you have to sell everything you have and give it to the poor, but it does mean that every penny you have is his, and is under his lordship, and your use of those pennies should reflect the priorities of his Kingdom.

You see, for a disciple, Jesus isn't just their savior; he's their Lord. Customers are perfectly happy with the Jesus as savior. That's the part of Jesus they want. That's the service they're looking for. When trouble comes, "Jesus, help! Jesus, save!" But a disciple wants Jesus as their Lord, so she seeks to bring every aspect of her life under the rule of the master.

In a similar way, a disciple is always listening for the voice of the master. She wants her whole life ready for his call. That's clear in this passage. The lives of the four fishermen is ruled by the call of God. Jesus says 'follow me' and that's that. They drop everything and they follow. For a disciple, that call is not just a one-time thing. Moment by moment a disciple is asking Jesus to show him the path, to lead him deeper into discipleship.

You see that with these 4 guys. Almost right after calling them to follow, Jesus calls them again. At the beginning of chapter 5 he says to his disciples, come with me to this mountainside and let me show you what the life of discipleship looks like. And they sit at his feet while he shares the words of the sermon on the mount. This whole sermon is a call to deep discipleship. I want you to have a life where you are so full of integrity, where you are such a trustworthy person, that you don't ever have to take any oaths, you can just let your yes be yes and your no be no. A life so full of mercy that when someone strikes you on one cheek you turn and offer him the other. A life so full of generosity that when someone asks for your shirt, you give your coat as well. A life so full of goodness that it is like a light on a stand that lights up the world around you.

The call to discipleship is not a one-time response to the master; it's a whole life journey where we try to go deeper and deeper into his life. As individuals and in communities, we listen for the master's voice. We pray together, we gather around his Word, we encourage each other down the road of discipleship. Every morning we wake up and live with hearts and minds open to the master: "Here I am Jesus. Where do you want me to go today Jesus? Show me the path of discipleship."

Disciples know that following the master's call will mean things will make life difficult. Discipleship is not convenient; it is challenging. Customers are always looking for convenience and they make their customer decisions expecting that their purchase will make their life better. Disciples make their commitment knowing that it will make their life hard. Disciples follow Jesus knowing that He will lead them through a vale of trial and uncertainty.

Think of the four men called in our story. Peter, Andrew, James and John. Do you realize that for three out of the 4 of these young men, we will be able to draw a line from answering this call on the seashore to their ultimate execution? Tradition tells us that Peter, and Andrew were both executed around 60 AD. James was killed by Herod at the beginning of Acts. Life as a disciple will bring you into hard places, dark places, painful places that make no sense. You will be called to carry a cross. You will be called to give up your life.

I know that when I talk like this I run the risk of making the Christian life seem like a miserable slog - a grim journey with gritted teeth through a vale of tears. It's not. This life of discipleship is full and meaningful. It's what you were meant for. You were meant to be a disciple. You were born to be a disciple. All this pain that you are experiencing on the journey is part of the process, part of the glorious transformation in which God is

making you the person he intends you to be. He is making you like Jesus. That's why the path is so hard, because the Holy Spirit isn't making you into any old thing; the Holy Spirit is making you like Jesus. He's stripping away all the selfishness and the pride and the fear, and he's planting in you the eternal life of Jesus.

So, we can talk about the pain of discipleship – Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer – “When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die!” “The cost of discipleship! Count the cost!” All true of course. I've said the same in this sermon. But never forget the end. We will be like Jesus.

1 John 3: “Dear friends we are children of God, and what exactly we will be has not yet been made known, but we know that when Christ appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.” Romans 8:28 “Those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son in order that Jesus might be the first of many brothers and sisters.”

Are we like Jesus now? Does his love live in us? Do we have his hope his grace his wisdom? Does his joy live in our hearts? No. If only, right? But doesn't every fiber of your being want His life to fill you? To have his joy live in you, his wisdom, his compassion for the weak, his courage in the face of injustice, his clear eyed vision of the right, his love so strong that it would let itself be pierced for the sake of people he loved, his vision so strong that could look at messy people like us and see us as people worth saving and filling. Not only is it what we want to be, it's what we were made for. His word and Spirit are making us into this person. He died to make us into that person.

So yes, you could be like the crowd and try to keep that low key customer relationship with Jesus. Lord knows it's simpler. I mean, would it have been easier if Andrew and Peter and James and John had just stuck to their nets? Would it have been easier if they just keep living that life run by bills and middle class desires and weekend distractions? Yes of course. So much simpler and so much emptier, and smaller and sadder. And so it is in love, in grace, because he wants to offer you the whole world, because he sees who you could be, Jesus comes down to your seashore again today and says to you, “Follow me.”

©Rev. Peter Jonker