

Encounters with Jesus Matthew: The Eager Volunteer

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Peter Jonker

Matthew 8:18-27

There is so much going on in this Bible text. You could do a whole sermon series on different elements of this text. This morning, I just want to focus on one aspect of this text. I want to drill down into one part of this story. I want to look closely and deeply at the first man Jesus encounters, that first eager volunteer who says, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go!”

Two men approach Jesus and volunteer to be disciples. Jesus pours cold water on them both. For the second volunteer, you can kind of see why he does that. The man wants to qualify his discipleship with a family commitment. But Jesus says, if you follow me you have to be all in; even family relationships take second place. That’s a challenging word, and worth a sermon all by itself. But Jesus says similar things about family and discipleship in other places, so you can kind of understand why he resists recruit number 2.

But recruit number one is different. There’s no qualification to his discipleship. He doesn’t have an exception or a hesitation. “Teacher! I will follow you wherever you go!!!!” Jesus you’re great! I think you’re awesome! I will be your number one follower. I will give 110%! I will run through a wall for you!” What’s wrong with volunteer number one!? He seems like the perfect candidate. He’s full of enthusiasm. Why wouldn’t you want him on your team!? Why does Jesus put him off by saying “foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head?”

As I thought about that question I realized something. Have you ever noticed that Jesus never accepts volunteers? There is no record in any of the gospels of someone coming up to Jesus and saying, “Hey! I’d like to be your disciple! I volunteer!” and Jesus saying, “Sure! Come on board.” He’s always ho hum about the volunteers. The disciples who do follow were all summoned by Jesus. He says ‘follow me,’ and they follow. The volunteers are met with resistance. There are multiple examples of this. Jesus does the same thing with some volunteers in Luke chapter 9. Jesus does something similar the with the rich young man who approaches him in Matthew 18. The man seems interested in discipleship, but Jesus tells the man he has to sell everything he has and give it to the poor and that’s the end of that. Jesus does something similar with Peter. After Jesus predicts that the disciples will all abandon him when he is arrested, Peter stands up and thumps his chest and says, “Even if all these others fall away, I never will!” It’s not volunteering exactly but it has the same energy, the same ambitious spirit as “Teacher I will follow you wherever you go!” Jesus douses his enthusiasm. “Peter, not only will you abandon me, you will deny me 3 times.” What does Jesus have against volunteers! Why does Jesus say no to this enthusiastic man who promises to follow him wherever?

Let me make a case that the reason Jesus pushes back against volunteer number one is that he senses an excess of personal ambition in this young man. He senses that this man has got stars in his eyes and he’s thinking that following Jesus might be the road to personal success and personal glory.

Why do I think that? Well, there are a couple of clues. First there’s Jesus’ popularity. Right now, everyone thinks Jesus is awesome. People love his preaching – he preaches as one with authority and not like those teachers of the law! People love his miracles (obviously), and large crowds are following Jesus all over the place. He is the number one ticket in town. Everyone wants a selfie with Jesus. In fact, Jesus is so popular that he needs a little break. Verse 18 “When Jesus saw the crowds he gave orders to get in the boat and go to the other side of the lake.”

Now, remembering that popularity, look closely: what is the profession of this volunteer? He is a teacher. And how does he address Jesus? What title does he use when he addresses Jesus? He calls him teacher. Is it reasonable to think that this eager and ambitious young man, who is genuinely enthusiastic about Jesus, might see discipleship as an opportunity for professional advancement, as a stepping stone to greater things in his career as a teacher of the law? Is he thinking, ‘you know a few years studying under this rock star teacher would look really good on my resume when I’m applying for that big job in Jerusalem?’ This ambitious volunteer wants to get into the boat with Jesus so he can be #blessed.

The second thing that suggests personal success and personal glory might be at issue here is Jesus' response to the volunteer. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head." That is exactly the sort of thing you'd say to someone who thinks that discipleship will yield success and glory. "Friend if you are upwardly mobile, if you are ambitious for success and recognition, you don't want to get in this boat. That is not where this ship is heading." And then as a kind of visual demonstration of what discipleship is really about, the disciples follow Jesus into the boat and find that they are led into the middle of a storm. Not just any storm, "a furious storm" says Matthew, a storm that sent waves crashing over the side of the boat. Following Jesus leads right into a storm. The path of discipleship leads into a storm.

I think God sends this storm to push back on the expectations of this eager young volunteer. I think the Spirit teaches us two things about discipleship in this storm. First, the journey of discipleship will be harder than you think.

Following Jesus is a beautiful journey. When you follow him you have a hope that can't be shaken, which is great. When you follow Jesus you do deeply meaningful, profoundly challenging work with his people. When you follow Jesus there are many days of joy and sunshine. Discipleship includes things like Easter morning services where, between your singing and Larry's playing it feels as though the roof will lift off this place. Discipleship includes professions of faith where children whom we've seen scamper up this aisle and plunk themselves down for the children's sermon walk up in front stand up and profess their faith. There are many days in your life of happiness and joy where the work of God is pleasant and yields fruit and everyone is happy. But there are also days of storms where the wind is pounding your boat and the waves are washing over you; days when things don't make much sense and it feels like Jesus is asleep.

I want to say this to young people here. Sometimes when you grow up in the church the songs you sing celebrate the sunny side of discipleship. They celebrate the joy of being God's child. Or they celebrate the goodness of his gifts. Sometimes ministers and the chapel speakers talk as though faith is warm and wonderful and we feel Jesus right there with us at every moment. Now on the path of discipleship there are lots of days like that, and in the place where the path of discipleship ends, it is always like that. But along the way there are days when it storms, when you are discouraged, and where you wish you could hear the voice of Jesus more clearly. There are days where you will feel like the disciples in the boat. Sometimes there will be lots of those days all in a row. I want you to know that now so that when they come you will know that it doesn't mean you've lost the path. It doesn't mean that Jesus has abandoned you on this storm part of the path. He's called you to this hard place. He calls you go out into the storm, to absorb the anger and pain you find there, and to be a person of love and light and truth. I don't know why he brings our little boat into these storms, but he does, and when he does, he promises he'll be with us in the boat when they come.

The first volunteer thinks following Jesus is going to be a sunlit path of success and happiness. The storm shows us otherwise. Discipleship is a glorious and meaningful path, but sometimes God sends you into a storm.

The second thing we learn about discipleship from this storm is that we disciples aren't as strong or as smart as we think we are. In the gospel of Matthew, this is the first time you see Jesus' disciples act on their own. Up to now all they've done is follow Jesus, watch him and listen to him. None of the disciples has actually even said anything. This is the first moment where they have a chance to show their quality. And how do they do? Not great. They are not titans of faith. Honestly, they kind of go into self-preservation mode. "Lord save us! we're going to drown!" Jesus rebukes them because he's hoping that in the storms of life disciples will worry about more than self-preservation.

So the disciples fall flat on their face, and unfortunately that becomes a pretty consistent pattern throughout the gospel. They don't always mess up. They have moments of success, but there are repeated misunderstandings and stumbling and failures. Think of the big picture for a moment. At the end of the gospels Jesus has completed his earthly work, he's risen from the dead he's changed everything. What percentage of the success of that mission comes from the commitment and passion and energy of the disciples? 50 percent? 10 percent? 1 percent? The answer is zero. Zero percent.

This young volunteer comes up to Jesus full of ambition, full of confidence, "Jesus, I will follow you wherever you go. I will be a warrior for you." Jesus' reply and the storm that follow suggests he might not be as strong or as smart as he thinks he is.

I think many of us start out in discipleship a little like this first volunteer. I know I did. ‘Jesus I’m ready. I’m going to work hard! I will go out there and be your warrior! I will figure out all the answers and I will fix all the things.’ Maybe you started out that way too. Now that I’ve been through a few storms, I’m far less confident in my ability to figure out all the answers, and I’m far less confident in my ability to fix things. As I get older, I find that I’m giving more and more of it to Jesus. The problems are harder than I thought and I’m less confident in my ability and human capability in general. That doesn’t mean I’ve stopped working for the kingdom, or that my faith is less. It’s just I’m less focused on my capability, and I’m more focused on the One who’s in the boat with me.

This happens to disciples. As you know, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a faithful disciple. From an early age he dedicated himself to the work of the Lord. He did that as an author, as a teacher, as a seminary president and most famously of all, as a man who stood up to Hitler and the Nazis. His resistance got him thrown in jail and eventually executed just a few weeks before the war ended.

Shortly before his death, while he was in the middle of prison, in the middle of the storm, he wrote a poem which was honest about how all the storms had affected his sense of himself as a disciple. I won’t read the whole thing, but at the beginning of the poem he notes that so many people think he is so strong and how that doesn’t match his self-perception. The poem is a prayer in which he asks Jesus the question, “Who am I?” Am I the person people think I am? ‘Lord, everyone thinks I’m so calm and strong, and so in control. Everyone thinks I’m some great hero of faith. But is that who I really am?’

Or am I more like what my own heart says of me: “restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat, yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds, thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness, trembling with anger at despotism and petty humiliation, tossing in expectation of great events, powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance, weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making, faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?” Who am I? asks Bonhoeffer. Am I the heroic disciple, or am I a beaten, defeated man whose efforts amount to nothing? Here’s how Bonhoeffer ends the poem: “Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, you know, O God, I belong to you.”

In all our storms, in life and in death, where is our hope? What is our only comfort? It’s not in our ability as a disciple. It’s that we are not our own but belong, body and soul, in life and in death to the man in the boat with us. And so we will do our best to be his disciples. We will try to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God, we will try to make the world a better place, but ultimately we depend on him, and at the end, he will stand up and raise his arms over the storm of history and say peace, be still.

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