

3 Epiphany (B)

Mk 1.14-20

There are some stories in the scriptures that make it hard to be a Christian, and I think that in some ways this morning's gospel is one of them.

Now, why is that the case? Our gospel seems like a fairly straightforward story: Jesus begins his public ministry by proclaiming the good news and recruiting some disciples. So what's the problem?

The reason I think this text makes it hard to be a Christian is because of the image it presents of what it means to be a disciple. "Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him." And he went on a little farther and saw James and his brother, John, and he called to them, and they left their father in the boat and followed him.

I don't know about you, but when I hear that I immediately think, "I can't do that." I can't leave everything, I can't walk out on my job, I can't turn my back on my family, just to go follow Jesus. And what does it mean to follow Jesus these days, anyway? It's not like he's walking around, proclaiming the good news of God here in Kansas.

That's why I think this text is a hard one. And because it's a hard one, it's easy for us to assume that this text has nothing to say to us, other than perhaps providing us with a bit of interesting historical information about the early ministry of Jesus.

In other words, today's gospel gives us an image of discipleship that seems to us to be quite radical. The moment they heard the call of Jesus, these guys walked away from everything: their lives, their jobs, their families. Two words from the master—"Follow me"—and they were out the door.

We look at that, and we think, "There's no way I can do that; I've got a family that I love, I've got bills to pay, I've got work that I enjoy doing. Even if I wanted to, I can't just walk away and leave it all."

One of two things is likely to happen at this point: we're likely either to feel guilty about what we perceive as our lack of commitment, or we rationalize our way out of any sense of discipleship. On the one hand, we may feel that we're second-class Christians because we don't give evidence to the same kind of commitment that Simon and Andrew and James and John did. We don't measure up to their level of discipleship. So we settle for a second-class life of faith. We don't expect much, and that's exactly what happens: not much.

Or, on the other hand, we rationalize our way out of any sense of discipleship. "Well," we think, "times were different then, and the call of Jesus means something different now than it did back then, and anyway God wouldn't want me to neglect my responsibilities, so that kind of discipleship is not really for me. I don't have to practice radical discipleship; it's enough for me

to practice kind-of, sort-of discipleship, nominal discipleship. I'll try my best, and that should do it."

If we choose either of these options, we end up talking ourselves out of being radical followers of Jesus. We convince ourselves either that we can't, or we don't have to. We end up feeling that the call to discipleship is not really for us.

But what if it is? What if Jesus invites us to the same kind of radical commitment that he invited Simon and Andrew and James and John? In fact, what if we're actually expected to do something *harder* and *more* radical than what Simon and Andrew and James and John did? What if we're expected to follow Jesus with the same kind of commitment, but *without* leaving our nets and without leaving our families and without leaving our lives behind?

For a very long time in the Christian tradition there's been a kind of working assumption that the less encumbered you are, the holier you are. The "real" Christians are those who divest themselves of their money and their possessions and their professional relationships and their personal relationships and all the other attachments that tie them to this world, and they just go off and live with God on some mountain somewhere. That's the classic image, isn't it? St. Antony going off to live in the Egyptian desert. St. Francis shedding his expensive clothes in the middle of the town square and committing himself to poverty. St. Julian living in her boarded-up little hut. Or James and John, the sons of Zebedee, leaving their nets and their father and going off to follow Jesus.

Now, I would not for a moment want to presume to suggest that those people and others like them weren't responding to the call of Jesus in their lives. But what I *would* like to suggest is that we do ourselves no favors when we hold up that kind of life as the model or the paradigm of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. If that's our only option for what it means to be a true disciple, then I'm afraid it's not going to work for many of us.

But there's another way, a way that in many respects is even more demanding and even more of a challenge than is the path of renunciation.

So what does this other way look like? Well, as it turns out, it looks a lot like what we do here this morning in our celebration of the Eucharist. When we celebrate Communion, we're doing several things at once. We offer to God the work of our hands; our tithe, the money that we present to the Lord, is an offering of our handiwork, and the bread and the wine are not just raw materials, but elements of creation, fruit and wheat, that have been crafted and molded by our hands.

We offer these things to God and we ask him to bless them and to use them as a means of giving us his grace. We ask God to receive the gifts that we offer and to make them a blessing for us. And God gives them back, sanctified by his Holy Spirit, and they become instruments of God's mercy. We receive back the gifts that we first offered to God and in so doing we receive the blessing that he has in store for us. And we find ourselves strengthened to do the work that he gives us to do.

This is a good way to think about how it is that we are called to live as radical disciples of Jesus. When we begin to see all the dimensions of our lives—our work, our play, our families, our relationships, our hopes and dreams—when we learn to see these things as offerings we can make to God, then we find ourselves living eucharistic lives. We begin to learn to surrender more and more of ourselves to God, not by divesting ourselves of these things, but by offering them to God and asking God to bless them and to make them a blessing for us. And when they become a blessing for us, then we can become a blessing for others.

We don't have to leave our nets behind; instead, we can say to God, "Lord, take these nets and make them instruments of your mercy and grace." We don't have to leave our father in the boat and go off to follow Jesus; instead, we can say to God, "Lord, help me to see your hand at work in the place I am; help me to see the people amongst whom you have placed me as ministers of your grace, and help me to show your love to them."

That's radical discipleship. That, I think, speaks of a commitment to follow Jesus that in some very important ways is even more profound than the kind of commitment we see in this morning's gospel lesson. Rather than see the call to follow Jesus as an either/or proposition—either Jesus or the world—this way of responding to the call to follow Jesus is a both/and—Jesus and the world, Jesus in the world. When we begin to learn to see Jesus in the world, then eventually we see the world in Jesus. Everything becomes a means of grace; every moment becomes an occasion of thanksgiving.

So do not think that the words of Jesus are not for you; do not think he is not calling you to follow him. Do not think that the call to be a disciple and the path of radical commitment is not something you can pursue. The time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, and we are all of us called to believe in the good news and to help proclaim the message of God's salvation to the world. There is no question as to whether or not we are called. The only question is: how will we respond?

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