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John 1:43-51
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Called or Called Out?

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of leading GPC's confirmation class. We have 14 teenagers learning about Christianity and what it means to follow Jesus and join a church. The topic for discussion that week was about being called. We read some of the stories of Jesus calling the first disciples and then I asked the question, "If Jesus asked you to follow him, what questions would you want to ask him to help make your decision?" The responses were hilarious from: what are we going to eat? Can I share my iphone location with my parents, so I don't get in trouble? One of them referred to Jesus as, "Brah" and asked, "Brah, I just have to ask where we are going because this is sort of sus." Another confirmand said, "If I knew it was Jesus then I would trust him and probably wouldn't have any questions."

The range of responses was comical but also probably so accurate. Some of us would have questions, some might not, some would have doubts, some would have strong faith, some would want to go right away, some would want to get our things in order. I feel like I would be in the last category – I would definitely want to go and be part of the Jesus movement, but I need to move some stuff around to make that happen. The question of whether to follow Jesus is one that we are confronted with throughout our lives.

Tolstoy said, "There are only two plots in all of literature; a stranger comes to town and a man goes on a journey." I say there are only two plots in all of biblical call stories: a person gets called or a person gets called out. The first way is the easy way. A stranger, Jesus, comes to town and says two powerful words, "follow me" - someone hears the call and becomes a disciple. This is how it went for Simon Peter and Andrew, the fishermen. 'Follow me' and immediately they left their nets and followed Jesus. This is how it went for Matthew, the tax collector and for the brothers, James and John. Follow me and they just went!

The other path to discipleship is people who need to be called out. Think of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, sitting up in the tree, called out by Jesus. Think of Nicodemus, hiding in the darkness, called out by Jesus. Or famously, the Apostle Paul on the Damascus Road, called out by Jesus. Each of these became disciples but they needed more than just the words "Follow Me" in order to convince them.

I am interested in what compels people to be followers of Jesus today. Do people today hear invitations to follow and accept them? Or do people have experiences of Jesus? Or do people get called out by God in particular ways? I am always really curious about faith origin stories.

Today's bible story is a story of two different conversions. One of being called and one being called out. Philip was the one who heard "follow me" and he followed. Then he went to tell his friend about Jesus. Philip said to Nathanael, "We have found him, we found the man Moses and the prophets wrote about, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael scoffs, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael seemed to approach life with a critical lens. To me he is like the disgruntled guy in the back pew... – "Nazareth – please!" – insert the eye roll. Time out: public service announcement – if you roll your eyes during church, I can see it. That's all I wanted to say. But Jesus seemed unfazed by Nathanael's passive aggressive comment. He engages in a conversation with Nathanael revealing that he knows things about him, in fact he knows a lot about him.

I wonder if it was in being known that he was converted. Jesus revealed that he knew both Nathanael's character and what he had been up to. Jesus knew both the good and the bad. And Nathanael felt sort of exposed but not in that way where you are caught red handed but, in that way, where someone really gets you. Maybe that was what changed his mind. He changed from a skeptic into a disciple. "*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*" he professes.

It is always surprising to confirmation kids when we tell them that's all they have to do in order to join the church, they just have a profession of faith about Jesus. The Book of Order (G-1.0302), the Presbyterian Church's governing documents states: *A congregation shall welcome all persons who trust in God's grace in Jesus Christ and desire to be part of the fellowship and ministry of his Church. No person shall be denied membership for any reason not related to the profession of faith. The Gospel leads members to extend the fellowship of Christ to all persons. Failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the Gospel.*

The twentieth century Swiss physician, Paul Tournier told a story of a pastor who asked young people in his confirmation class a simple question: "What is religion?" A boy in the class immediately replied, not a doubt in his little Swiss head, "Religion," he said, "shows us the things we must not do."

I really hope no kid going through our confirmation program would give this type of response. The religion of Jesus was about showing people what they could do rather than telling them what not to do. Jesus' religion was about showing people the things they could be – he would take fishermen and turn them into evangelists. He would take blind people and turn them into ministers. He would take shady businessmen and turn them into philanthropists. He would take women broken by the social structures and seat them at high tables. Jesus found people who were hardened or broken or fragile or outsiders or unclean or wealthy or skeptical or powerful and say to them, I see you. And I can use you.

The thing is no one ever interviewed to be a disciple, trying to put their best foot forward, showing Jesus their most polished sides. Jesus just found people along the way and invited them to become disciples. There is something really compelling about the idea that we do not have to apply to be disciples or try out or get through some probation period in order to follow Jesus of Nazareth. The invitation is open, all we have to do is accept the invitation and then Jesus can work with us, no matter what. And yes, Jesus knows what you are really like so you can stop pretending to be perfect. Being a Christian is not about being

perfect but about accepting the call to follow Jesus, who was perfect and who creates a beautiful example for how to live our lives.

Martha Highsmith writes, “This Christian faith creates an entirely new geometry. The circle of believers that was once defined by its boundaries, the law, is now defined by its center, Christ. The attention to who is in and who is out is no longer the focus. Rather the focus is on the One who calls and claims, redeems, and loves. We are called to start in the center and live as though the circle is infinite – which, of course, it is.”

I would like that definition of the Christian religion that it is about being Christ centered instead of self-centered. Whether you are called and easily follow or you need to be called out from tree limbs or dark corners or skeptical sidelines – Jesus is ready when you are. Ready to be the center, which means ready to offer you faith in something beyond the here and now, ready for you to have greater meaning for your days, ready to provide you with hope for the life to come. Jesus’ call is not to tell you what not to do but to become the center so you can live into a fuller life.

Richard was the town librarian. Unlike the other people in his new member class, he’d never been part of any church before. When he joined, at age fifty-two, he was also baptized. When he wrote to his minister to say he was ready to join he wrote this: “There comes a time in life when we are forced to admit the truth: I have missed the mark. In my weakness I cannot continue alone. We realize that we have been swollen with pride, driven by a relentless and merciless ego. But in time, pride drains away like a stream in summer, and the once-mighty ego is reduced to pointless rantings. It stands revealed not as the center of our being, but as a millstone around the neck . . . The only real solution to this is love, love focused and embodied in Jesus Christ. The unknowable, unfathomable, indefinable mystery which we have the temerity to address as our God may be approached through his beloved Son, our Lord and Redeemer, Jesus.”

That guy is ready. That guy was called out by Jesus into the infinite circle of all those who have heard the call. Jesus is to be followed - not so your life can be limited by religious rules and regulations but because following Jesus can empower and equip you with a far greater calling than you will find on our own accord. Called or called out - whatever way you get there is fine – just make sure Christ is in fact your center!

Amen.