

Date: January 23, 2005

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 3

**SERMON: The Call of Christ**

Text(s): Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23

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Some years ago, in the *National Catholic Reporter*, Sister Mary Melanie wrote an article in which she imagined Jesus engaging a psychological testing service to screen candidates for the positions of the twelve disciples. She went through the gospels, taking each story that involves the disciples, and based on their words or actions in those stories, plotted an imaginary chart of their personality profiles. She included the profile of St. Peter in her article along with this letter to Jesus from the head of the Galilee Psychological Testing service:

*Dear Mr. Christ,*

*Several weeks ago, you requested that we give our series of psychological tests to the 12 men you are considering as possible associates in your work of ministry. Although we are still in the process of administering and compiling the results of those tests, we thought that you would be anxious to receive a sample of the results as soon as possible. Hence we are enclosing the test results for Mr. Simon bar-Jonah, sometimes known as Simon Peter. His profile sheet accompanies this letter.*

*As you can see, Mr. bar-Jonah's personality is characterized by a dangerous rashness, overt pride, and a lack of emotional stability that would no doubt be detrimental to you and your work. We feel also that his general appearance would create a bad image for your proposed organization.*

*Furthermore, during our research, we discovered that Mr. bar-Jonah has been unsuccessful in his current employment. To put it bluntly, he is a "lousy" fisherman. We suspect that his lack of success in this job is the cause of his eagerness to leave all and follow you.*

*Therefore, based on our testing, we highly recommend that you do not consider Mr. bar-*

*Jonah as a possible associate. We will make further recommendations regarding the fitness of the other eleven as soon as possible. We've tested all except for Mr. Thomas the Twin who failed to show up for his appointment.*

*Based on the evidence we have so far, ten of the remaining eleven show various degrees of personality maladjustment which would render them less than suitable for the positions you have in mind. We would recommend heartily only Mr. Judas Iscariot, who seems to be firmly rooted in reality and has a fine head for financial matters and administration. He would no doubt be a real asset to you and your organization.*

*Sincerely,*

*The Galilee Psychological Testing Service*

I think we can all be grateful that Jesus didn't have the Galilee Psychological Testing Service around when he was looking for disciples. The great thing about Peter and Andrew and James and John and Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany and all the rest of those who followed Jesus is not that they were great spiritual giants, great heroes of faith and courage, but that they were just real people, with all of the usual personality maladjustments, all the usual needs and strengths and failings that all of us have.

Jesus bore with them patiently at times, and at other times not so patiently. He taught them, rebuked them, tolerated them, got disgusted and angry with them, but above all, as St. John tells us, "he loved them to the end." And through that real-life kind of relationship with Jesus, those men and women were gradually shaped into the people who became the models for the faith of the early church and for the church of all the ages. The church has not historically venerated the disciples because they were such shining examples of spiritual greatness and heroic faith; it has venerated them precisely because they demonstrate what kind of faith and courage are possible for ordinary people like us. It was that dangerously rash, proud, erratic, unsuccessful fisherman Simon bar-Jonah to

whom Jesus said, “I’m going to call you Peter, a Rock, and upon this rock I will build my church.”

Being a disciple of Jesus, then does not demand heroic faith and great spiritual depth or even a stable psychological profile; what it requires is hearing and answering the call of Christ to be with him, to follow him. So the question for us, it seems, is what does it mean to hear the call of Christ and follow him as disciples?

There are two facets to the call to discipleship, two sides of one coin, if you will. The first is that the call of Christ requires a deeply personal response from us. St. Matthew gives us a clue to the shape of this response by introducing the story of Jesus’ calling of his first disciples with the summary statement of the whole thrust of Jesus’ message, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” Whatever else hearing Christ’s call means, it involves recognizing that in Jesus Christ, a new order has broken into the world. And in light of that new reality, one has to stop, re-order one’s priorities, and begin to live life in a new direction. That’s what repentance means —turning around and going in a new direction. It does not mean wallowing in guilt or constantly beating our breasts and saying “*mea culpa, mea culpa.*” Inevitably, for us, as for the first disciples, that turning around will involve leaving some things behind. As we move in the direction Christ is going, that is, as we allow Christ’s own life to become determinative for ours, we will continually discover things that we have to leave behind—old values, old habits, old resentments, old prejudices, old behaviors, old ideologies. That leaving is repentance. We turn away from anything that hinders us from becoming Christ-like, which is to say, we turn away from anything that prevents us from learning to love as Christ loved. There’s no great mystery about it. It’s just incredibly difficult to do because we are so self-centered. We are so often the center of our universe. Which is exactly what Dietrich

Bonhoeffer had in mind, I think, when he said in his classic work *The Cost of Discipleship*, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” Repentance is a dying to self-centeredness, and a re-orientation of our life around a new center. So repentance is a continual necessity; it is never a single act, but an act that must be repeated almost daily. Only as we leave behind those things that get in the way of our whole-hearted following of Christ, can we open up space for the love and life of Christ to take root in us.

Each of those first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John had to respond to that call personally. They had to repent, they had to leave some things behind in order to follow. And so will we.

The other side of the coin is that while the call to discipleship in Christ must be answered personally and individually, it is always, at the same time, a call to part of a new community. “*It is not good for the human to be alone,*” was God’s creative word. Fundamentally, to be human is to be in community. It is impossible to love without there being someone to love. We are social beings, and society is implied in our very creation. There is no holiness that is not social holiness. Jesus called his disciples to be with him and with one another in fellowship and in accountable relationships. For Matthew’s community, it meant opening up their circle to include Gentiles or the poor and marginalized within the House of Israel. Which is why at the end of his Gospel there is that terrifying scene of the final judgment, when Christ says that whoever has failed to give a cup of cold water or a piece of clothing to the poorest and lowliest of people has failed to give it to Christ himself. For us to hear and respond to Christ’s call to be disciples means that we, too, must recognize our need to be a community that is visibly and tangibly modeling the love of Christ for the lowliest and the lost.

The church is the place where we actually live in community with others who are also

repenting and learning to be conformed to the image of Christ, and who thus demonstrate to the world that it is possible for people of different languages, different races, different cultures, different economic and social backgrounds to love one another instead of discriminating against one another or even killing one another. When those who call themselves Christians forget this fundamental truth that they are to be a light to the nations, then tragedies occur which shame us all and bring the name of Christ into disrepute, and we can all think of many examples of such shameful failures on the church's part. This is precisely why the call to discipleship always begins with the demand for repentance, a repentance which must be continually repeated. Unless the community of disciples is constantly affirming its identity as those who are living under the sovereign rule of God, the rule of love, the church becomes only another oppressive and even demonic human institution.

If I take seriously God's call to discipleship as something that I must respond to personally and must live out in community, it follows, then, that I cannot simply choose to live my life on the basis of my personal preferences alone. Questions of vocation, occupation, choice of a life partner, how I earn and spend and give away money, my political loyalties— all are shaped by my response to Christ's call. Following Christ as a disciple is the new center around which everything that is my life orbits. I must ask, "What is Christ calling me to do and to be at this point in my life?" My choices may very well be influenced by my natural, which is to say God-given, abilities, temperament, or inclinations. But those natural abilities and inclinations, as in the example of the personality profiles of the first disciples, don't always carry the most weight. I have to test the legitimacy of my own desires against my commitment to follow Christ. Nor can I simply choose to do what will always bring me the most pleasure, pay me the highest salary, gain me the most prestige,

win me the approval of my family and friends, or assure me of being a success. John Wesley put it this way: *"In some things we may please Christ and please ourselves; in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves."*

In the church in New Brunswick, NJ, where I formerly served, there was a man named Herman Carr. Herman was a physics professor at Rutgers, and he held the patents of some of the technology that gave us the CAT scan and the MRI scans that we take for granted today. Ironically, his own wife died of cancer the year before the first CAT scanner came on the market.

Herman could have lived his life in the ivory tower of academia, comfortably insulated by the considerable financial royalties on his patents. He could have attended a wealthy suburban church nearer his home in the Watchung Hills. But instead, he drove ten miles every Sunday to downtown New Brunswick to be part of an inner-city congregation that was committed to being a transforming presence among the poor and marginalized people who lived in fairly severe conditions of poverty.

During my seven years there, he was the self-appointed hospitality committee. Every Sunday, Herman stood by the door and made sure that if any person of color or anyone who looked like they were down-and-out came through the door, they got a warm handshake and welcome. And then, just before the service began, he'd look around and try to find someone who looked "out of place" there, especially if no one else was sitting near them, and he'd go take his seat next to them. As more and more immigrants from West Africa began showing up, they tended, at first, to sit near the back of the church, because they were newcomers, and uncertain of what place they would find. I knew I could always find Herman sitting back there among the new African immigrants, making sure they knew they were welcome in that church. And when we were engaged in some new ministry with the people in the high-rise housing projects below

our church, it was Herman who quietly, and without any visibility, would contribute more than his fair share financially to support those ministries, as well as personally participating as a volunteer. Herman, you see, was a disciple who really took seriously the call to follow Christ.

We don't know where the journey of discipleship will take us, any more than those fishermen of old could have dreamed that they would one day be the apostolic foundation on whom the church of Jesus Christ is built. But it will be an exciting, and perhaps even dangerous, journey, but it will always be one in which Christ promised that he himself would be our faithful companion and guide, "*Behold I am with you always, even to the close of the Age.*"