

## LEAVING SOMETHING BEHIND

Matthew 4:12-23

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on January 27, 2008 the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Text

#### ***Jesus Begins His Ministry in Galilee***

*Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:*

*‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—  
the people who sat in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death  
light has dawned.’*

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’*

#### ***Jesus Calls the First Disciples***

*As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.*

#### ***Jesus Ministers to Crowds of People***

*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*

In 1984, I began my service as Pastor of St. Thomas Presbyterian Church in Houston. Of the four churches I have served, St. Thomas is the most like Westminster, except that it was about one-fourth Westminster’s size.

An active family in the church had an eight-year-old son named Rob. Rob had a strong sense of ownership over the church.

- When I was unloading boxes as part of my move into the office, I met Rob, who informed me: “This is my church.”

- Before preaching my first sermon, one man pulled me aside and said: “You never really know what Rob is going to say in the children’s sermon, but don’t let him throw you off; we all know what he is like.”

The first time I gave the children’s sermon, I noticed Rob, in the “back row” of the children, with his arms folded across his chest.

I don’t remember what I said in the children’s sermon, but whatever I said led Rob, at some point, to unclench his arms, raise his hand, and say, in a complete, grammatically-correct sentence: “In order to follow Jesus, you have to leave something behind.” I can assure you the “adult sermon” that followed did not rise to the wisdom of Rob’s words.

## I.

One of my favorite passages in the Gospels has always been the call of the first disciples.

Jesus is walking along the Sea of Galilee. He sees two brothers, Simon and Andrew, fishing; for they are fishermen. “Follow me,” he calls to them. They immediately leave their nets and follow him.

Next Jesus sees James and John and their father Zebedee in another fishing rig. “Follow me,” he says. James and John leave their boat and their father and follow Jesus.

It is easy to romanticize this passage, as in one way does the 1924 hymn we just sang by the southern poet William Alexander Percy.<sup>1</sup>

*They cast their nets in Galilee  
Just off the hills of brown;  
Such happy, simply fisher folk,  
Before the Lord came down.*

The hymn goes on to speak of “contented, peaceful fishermen,” “trimm[ing] the flapping sail,” “haul[ing] the teeming net.” These words and images reinforce our stereotype that Christianity began as a rural, pastoral religion set in countryside and seashore. It may even play into our desire that following Christ, becoming a Christian, developing a strong prayer life, being active in the church, serving in a mission program, will lead us to the contentment and peace these simple fisher-folk seem to have had.

But the hymn goes on to say what Rob had somehow picked up in his eight years in a Presbyterian Church. “In order to follow Jesus, you have to leave something behind.”

*Young John, who trimmed the flapping sail,  
Homeless, in Patmos died.*

*Peter, who hauled the teeming net,  
Head down was crucified.*

What Peter “leaves behind,” eventually, is his life; what Peter and Andrew “leave behind” is their vocation. In order to follow Jesus, they leave behind

- The work of their life
- The means of their survival
- The way by which they support themselves and their families
- That which gets them up in the morning, keeps them awake at night, and bestows upon them a good portion of their identity and sense of worth.

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<sup>1</sup> William Alexander Percy, “They Cast Their Nets in Galilee,” 1924.

The next pair – James and John – leave behind not only their vocation, but also their father. “They left their boat and their father, and followed [Jesus].”

One pair leaves vocation; the second pair leaves vocation and family.

As the last stanza of the hymn says:

*The peace of God, it is no peace,  
But strife closed in the sod.  
Yet, [people], pray for but one thing—  
The marvelous peace of God.*

“In order to follow Jesus,” said Rob, “you have to leave something behind.”

## II.

This text, Rob’s wisdom, leave a question floating throw the air of the sanctuary this morning, a question that each of us must reach out and answer for ourselves: “What must I leave behind in order to follow Jesus?”

For some of us, what we need to leave behind is obvious:

- Love of money and power, status and celebrity
- Single-minded focus on self
- Addiction to alcohol or drugs, pornography or work.

Some of us need to leave behind emotional baggage that weighs us down and holds us back:

- A grudge we carry as if it were tattooed across our back
- A grief we can’t seem to shake
- An anger that thrills us when we feel it because it reminds us that we are alive even as it drives away those who are closest to us
- A haunting memory that pops into our consciousness and follows us into the woods no matter how deeply we travel to try to tie it up to a tree and leave it
- An insecurity that leads us to hold back from our children, our friends, our colleagues, ourselves, simply because we do not have the confidence to believe that anything we have it say is worthwhile
- A hatred, a racism, a bigotry that limits our ability to interact with and see the “child-of-God-ness” in another human being.

“In order to follow Jesus, we have to leave something behind.”

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Ironically, sometimes in order to follow Jesus, we have to leave the church behind – at least the church as it exists in the fallen, “treasure-in-earthen-vessels” form in which we know it.

One of the wise and inspiring preachers of our generation is Barbara Brown Taylor. After twenty years years of preaching in her local congregation and in conferences around the world, Taylor has written a book entitled *Leaving Church*<sup>2</sup>. Even though she continues to preach on occasion, she has simply made a decision to leave, not the faith, but the primary role as pastor and preacher she has played for the better part of her adult life institutional church. She writes:

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

Leaving church, I believe, is what church is for—leaving on a regular basis, leaving to see what God is up to in the world and joining God there, delivering all the riches of the institution to those who need them most, in full trust that God will never leave the church without all that it needs to live.<sup>3</sup>

Barbara Brown Taylor is “leaving church” in order to follow Jesus, in order to “join God... in the world.”

Sometimes what we leave behind is a deeply-ingrained view of the world, a deeply-held view of life that has shaped and molded us since our birth. It may be that in order to follow Jesus, we have to leave behind

- The way we thought our life would turn out
- The shape and form we thought our family would take
- Who we thought we would love versus who we love.

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Many of us know the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the bright, young German theologian who lived during the time Nazism swept over his native Germany. Scholars debate whether or not Bonhoeffer was a pure pacifist, but he was certainly averse to war and violence.<sup>4</sup> Yet he knew and was willing to face more directly than others the radical evil Nazism embodied. In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, he chronicled his movement from non-violent Christian to resister to co-conspirator in a plot to assassinate Hitler, a participation for which he was imprisoned (hence the title of his book) and executed. He writes:

I remember a conversation that I had in America thirteen years ago with a young French pastor. We were asking ourselves quite simply what we wanted to do with our lives. He said he would like to become a saint... At the time I was very impressed, but I disagreed with him, and said, in effect, that I should like to learn to have faith. For a long time I didn't realize the depth of the contrast. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it....

I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a ...so-called priestly type...By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In doing so we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith...<sup>5</sup>

In order to follow Jesus, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had to leave behind his fundamental conception of what it meant to be a Christian, his fundamental view of morality, his fundamental view of right and wrong, in favor of something more genuine and authentic to his situation, to the situation of his country.

### III.

I have long since lost contact with Rob. He would be in his mid-thirties now; probably – until this week – a hedge fund manager on Wall Street.

- I wonder if he remembers that children's sermon.
- I wonder if he is still following Jesus.
- I wonder what he has had to leave behind.

What about you?  
In order to follow Jesus,  
What are you going to leave behind?

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “The poured-out church,” *The Christian Century*, May 29, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> John W. de Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 148.

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1953) 369-370.