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You Can't Hide

Matthew 13:47-48

That passage is the story behind a Greek Religious Icon that sits on the desk in my study. It's something that everyone is bound to see when they come in for a visit. It shows the disciples in a boat hauling their fishing nets aboard...and they are filled, filled with fish of every kind. It's on my desk to send both a message and serve as a reminder that our job, my job, is to cast the net indiscriminately when it comes to proclaiming the Gospel. Our job is to do the catching. God's job is to do the sorting.

It's also a good example demonstrating that Jesus practiced what he preached or lived what he proclaimed for what he taught his disciples in terms of gathering the faithful is exactly what he did to gather or catch them. We are drawing this idea from our lectionary reading for today, the readings from the bible that try to follow the life of Christ in a chronological order. We are, after all, fresh from the birth story of Jesus and since there is little mentioned about his childhood; it doesn't take long to get to the launching of his career or ministry. In other words Christmas is over; it's time to get to work.

And early on in the story of his ministry we get the account of the gathering or recruitment of the disciples. That story has something relevant to say to us today as we continue to move through the great adventure of daily and faithful living. Of the twelve disciples that became Christ's pioneer followers, we only get the enlistment stories of seven in the Gospels. Let's see what their stories might have to say.

In the past, I've described Jesus as being very calculating and proactive in the assembly of his team, comparing his process to the creation of a business plan and then attacking each item on the to-do list. His initial vision, for example, was to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel and like any young entrepreneur enjoying success and rapid growth, he needed to move to stage two which was adding on a staff and support team. To spread his message the business plan included the hiring of district managers...the disciples. But if we stick with John's story from the bible we get an entirely different picture. Rather than a calculated plan Jesus simply plays it as he goes. The idea of adding disciples doesn't come from a well designed plan but from one person who hears what he has to say and says, "You'll need some help, sign me up!"

According to John's Gospel, Andrew was the first. He was a follower of John the Baptist but when he heard Jesus speak was drawn to follow him. *The two disciples heard*

him and went after Jesus. Jesus looked over his shoulder and said to them, "What are you after?" They said, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?" He replied, "Come along and see for yourself." They came, saw where he was living, and ended up staying with him for the day. It was late afternoon when this happened. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard John's witness and followed Jesus. ¹

H. W. Brands names his book about Benjamin Franklin The First American. Part of his reasoning for giving Franklin that title is that Franklin, before all others, gives himself over completely to the idea of a representative democracy. He is the first to say "sign me up." Like Andrew and Franklin some of us are inclined to do the same when it comes to anything from an idea to a philosophy, person, or faith. We are the first in line saying "sign me up."

And that takes courage. It involves risk, for we charge forward before all others. We invest in an enterprise that while unproven, appears to us to have a lot of potential. Many people aren't Andrews in that regard, but don't we need a few of them in our lives? From politicians trying to gather enormous support to people like ourselves on the scale of our individual lives we all need a few people who enter into our lives unsolicited saying "I've seen you...I've heard what you have to say...sign me up."

While some of us are not inclined to be those who are first in line we are people affected and influenced by the Andrew type. John's Gospel tells us "The first thing he did after finding where Jesus lived was find his own brother, Simon, telling him, 'We've found the Messiah.' He immediately led him to Jesus." As I mentioned before, this doesn't have anything to do with an initiative on Jesus' part, it's coming from somewhere else. The rock of the church, the first among equals, the eventual leader of the Christian movement was discovered by someone whose enthusiasm about what he'd come across led him to say, "You'd be interested, come have a look see."

And that isn't any different from how it works with us. We get excited about something or someone we know and draw or are drawn into something. "We've found the Messiah!" That isn't far from what was happening in the early days of the Civil Rights movement. A young minister from Mississippi named Ralph Abernathy heard a man named Martin Luther King speaking at a luncheon about a strategy for achieving racial equality. It was Abernathy who went to the African American leaders of the time saying, "I've seen the one who has the passion, charisma, and message to bring us all together. You need to come see him too."

Number three on our list of seven documented gathering stories of the disciples is Phillip. He's important because he represents the point at which Jesus begins to do some of the recruiting himself. He's the first disciple called by Christ. There really isn't much to go on from the scripture. All we get is an indication that Jesus goes to Galilee, spots Phillip and says, "Come, follow me." But that is enough to remind us that if you

believe in something that comes from the enthusiasm of others that may not be enough. There comes a time when you need to cast the net yourself.

When people were being recruited to staff the three ships that would sail the sea to find a new trading route to the Indies, the time came when Christopher Columbus, like Jesus, needed to go down the docks and walk the beach. He needed to convince others to become a part of the great adventure. In any worthy endeavor, be it a business plan, charity event, or faith journey, some need no convincing at all, others do and among those, we find several approaches that spark some familiarity with us.

Number four of the seven is Nathaniel and he exhibited an attitude so commonplace among many of us today. When he learns that Jesus is from the hick town of Nazareth he says to his friend Phillip, *"Nazareth! You've got to be kidding."* And to make matters even more challenging when Jesus greets him and says, *"Now here is a real Israelite, not a false bone in his body."* Nathaniel responds with a sarcastic, *"Where did you get that idea? You don't know me."*

It's a first impression mishap and it's almost as if Nathaniel has made up his mind that he's not going to like Jesus no matter what. How true that is for us. There are some people who initially rub us the wrong way. We are bound and determined not to like them. But Jesus does something that sometimes happens with us. He wins him over. He tells Nathaniel *"I know who you are. I've seen you before."* With that Nathaniel's heart begins to soften. It may not happen that quickly with us, but over time we too can warm to a person, idea, faith. We enter into the fold.

We need to step out of John's Gospel for the remaining accounts we have of those who became disciples of Jesus. James and John were fisherman that Jesus recruited directly at the same time. *"Come with me,"* he says, *"I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass."*

Sometimes we are drawn to new enterprises more from the need for excitement, or change, or boredom than anything else. James and John may not have known about Jesus and his message but they were ready for something. Here was a chance to run away and join the circus so they did. How often have we jumped on board of something without much thought or reason only to find that it profoundly changed and shaped their lives? From fisherman to servants of the lord, who would have "think?"

The last disciple gathering story is the most compelling for it serves as a reminder that being tapped by the eternal or any thing else can come at any time, to anyone at anyplace. In other words, *"You can't hide."* A man in the disreputable profession of tax collecting named Matthew catches Jesus' attention. *"Passing along, Jesus saw a man at his work collecting taxes...Jesus said, 'Come along with me.' Matthew stood up and followed him."*

One of my favorite paintings of Michelangelo Caravaggio is his Calling of St. Matthew. Troubled and prone to violence as he was, I think Caravaggio still got it. The painting shows Matthew and his associates counting money on one side, Jesus and Peter on the other. Jesus has his arm outstretched and is pointing to Matthew. Matthew is looking up from his pile of money with an expression of “Who...me?” But what is great about the painting is that Caravaggio has all the characters on Matthew’s side dressed in the contemporary clothes of the time. Jesus and Peter, on the other hand are draped in the plain clothes of Galileans. The call, the gathering, spans across the years coming to people of every kind, at any place...a net catching fish of every kind.

I think our receptors to that concept can be numbed by our own biological limitations. In his book The Tipping Point Malcolm Gladwell describes the work of an anthropologist named Robin Dunbar pushing the belief that our brains can only handle so much information when it comes to intimate relationships. The limit seems to be around 12 people because those 12 demand so much emotional and physical energy. If we go much beyond that we begin to overload our brain. Dunbar expands that theory to social relationships to what he calls the rule of 150. In our social, less intimate relationships 150 seems to be the limit. He gives many examples of this principle including a centuries old religious group called the Hutterites who have a policy that when one of their colonies approaches 150 they split to form a new one. One of its leaders explains, *“If you get too large you don’t have enough work in common, and then you start to become strangers and that close-knit fellowship starts to get lost.”*

Spanning across the years and coming to people of every kind at any place, the rule of 150 people are prone to think like the Hutterite leader that with an overwhelming number of people who have come to the Christ *“you start to become strangers and that close knit fellowship starts to get lost.”* While that may be true of us, let’s never put our earthly limitations on God. God is not bound to the rule of the 12 or 150. God knows us by name and we are his. From across the ages he points to us like he did to Matthew.

¹ The Message, John 1:37-40

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