
Called to ... what exactly?
Martin Grove United Church
February 10, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 5:1-11

Does anyone hear like listening to preachers on the radio? I will make a confession to you. When I was wrapping things up in Mimico before starting here, I decided I should listen to “Christian Radio” in the car when I could. I’m not sure exactly why I did it. But something about the language that was used by your search team during my interviews suggested to me that here at Martin Grove, I would not be in Kansas anymore. I had the sense that this congregation took a more classic/traditional outlook on the Bible and faith, so I figured I’d better learn some new language before I showed up. And I figured that radio preachers might be the ticket.

Whether that was a sensible idea or not, I did learn a few things in the process. I learned that radio preachers preach long sermons. Actually, in truth I think they preach a short sermon multiple times without sitting down in between. They believe in the technique of repetition to drive their points home. Radio preachers generally try to engage with people’s emotions, but at a vague level, which is only fair because they don’t know who is listening to them. But what I learned most of all is that all the sermons ended with the same punch line. I mean, sure, there were variations of that. But the exciting, dramatic, conclusion to every single sermon was some version of “give your life to Jesus”, or, “give your heart to Jesus”, or “put your faith in Jesus”. And the more sermons I heard like that, the more I started to dislike that ending.

To be clear, it’s not that I did - or do - disagree with those statements. I agree fully that we should give our hearts to Jesus. It’s just that “give your heart to Jesus” is a metaphor, and I think that preachers should help us all figure out what we actually need to do in more concrete terms. That’s why I have preached on a variety of topics here including the need to stop recycling for the sake of the environment, the need to stop eating animals, the need to fight racism, the need to consider deeply our human attraction to war, and other topics you may have thought had no place in church. But for me, it’s an

effort to put real flesh on the metaphor “give our hearts to Jesus”. It’s an attempt to talk about making actual, possible, doable life changes to help bring the kingdom of God to Rexdale, here, now. It’s about everybody finding their own healing, here, now.

Some weeks, given the biblical texts and what is happening on our streets, that task can be pretty easy. But many times, it is not. And it really doesn’t help that we have all heard these biblical stories so many times that we are perhaps used to hearing the stories and letting them roll off our backs thinking the stories cannot possibly apply to us. Take our reading from Luke today - Jesus calls fishers to follow him. The obvious take-home message is stay away from beaches, and Jesus will not annoy you by asking for anything. Well, that’s a literal reading of the text anyway. But if the message is just, “stay away from beaches”, we may as well have just watched the movie *Jaws*. Surely we can do better than that!

Jesus calls fishers and they follow. How many sermons have you already heard on this story? And how many times has a preacher told you this story is just about following Jesus blindly on faith. That might even work if Jesus actually called us on the phone, as depicted on the bulletin cover and told us something very specific we could do. But beyond the bad joke, what does “Jesus is calling us” mean? What does it mean if we go beyond the metaphor?

But first, I have a question for you. Think of the stories of Jesus as an adult. What are the first few stories of the adult Jesus about? What’s the first thing that happens to Jesus as an adult. What’s the second thing. I just want to cover the “early days” of Jesus as an adult.

[ask people for input here]

In both Mark and Matthew, the opening scenes of Jesus’s adult life are very similar. The first action for Jesus as an adult is to be baptized by John the baptizer. Then, Jesus goes into the wilderness to be tempted, and returns. Then John is arrested and Jesus starts his public ministry. Then Jesus calls fishers. Both Matthew and Mark make it sound like Jesus was a completely unknown person who wanders down a beach, tells

some fishers to leave their boats and follow him, and they agree. The fishers don't appear to deliberate, or ask Jesus who he is or what his credentials are. They don't ask what the pay is like. They don't even ask Jesus how long he wants them for? Does Jesus want them for an hour? Or the rest of the day? Or a year? Who knows? They just follow.

That way of reading the story has led to countless sermons that suggest that God and Jesus want blind faith. Sound familiar? There is one problem with that, however. Well, two problems. OK, I guess there are really three problems. One problem is that if we are called to blind faith does that just mean we should act on any whim that strikes us, imagining that the whim is from God? Even if we accept the challenge of "blind faith", how exactly do we know which of our whims come from God? Another problem is that when we hear the message about being called to blind faith, most of us tune out because we really don't know how to do that. As a metaphor it's fine, but we struggle to imagine any real action based on that idea. That way of reading the story lets us off the hook, because we can't really engage with it. And the third problem is that to read the story that way we have to gloss over some words. Depending on the translation, it's usually 4 words. And those words actually might matter. The words are "after John was arrested". Perhaps we can deal with all three of those problems right now.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. We just reviewed the early part of Jesus's adult life from Matthew and Mark. What about Luke? In Luke, Jesus's adult life starts with his baptism. Jesus then goes into the wilderness to be tempted. So far, it's the same story. But after his wilderness experience - in Luke - Jesus starts travelling around the country teaching in different synagogues. Then Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit. Then Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law. Then Jesus continues to preach throughout Judea. His preaching is provocative enough that he even gets run out of town sometimes, so we know he was doing something meaningful. Then - finally - Jesus calls fishers, as we just read a moment ago.

So in Luke's story, by the time Jesus gets around to calling the fishers, Jesus is already a known public figure who had already been teaching and healing. To connect with those 4 little words, Jesus began his public ministry "after John was arrested", and in

fact very likely took over John's little gang as their leader. Jesus came to John the baptizer, over time became a trusted member of that group and then took over the leadership of the group when John was arrested. Over time, Jesus took the group in a new direction. So, Jesus calling the fishers may simply have been a way of announcing that Jesus was now in charge of the group.

Why do we care about this? Is anything going to come out of this that makes that long preamble worthwhile? Well of course! Actually, you can't lose. If you like the place where this sermon ends up it will be worth that long preamble. And if you don't like it, you can rejoice that I'm not preaching next week. So, you really can't lose either way.

I care about this whole "after John was arrested" point because it completely changes the metaphor of the story. The story of "calling the fishers" is not a call to abandon rational thought and embrace blind faith after all. Jesus was not calling unknown fishers into an unknown project. Jesus was calling the fishers - who were already his friends - to continue the ministry that they were already a part of. Yes, to take it in new directions over time, but to build on an existing ministry. Jesus called his friends to continue, to adapt and to grow, not to start from scratch.

So - what does that mean for us, here in Rexdale, in 2019? What things in this church should we keep doing? What things do we need to start doing? What things can we let go of? And in our community, what's going on there? Our own call to follow Jesus here in Rexdale is not a call to do something completely new and off the wall. We do not need to look for insane new ideas. We need to be open to incremental changes that lead to new opportunities. We do not need blind faith. We don't need blindness at all - in fact we just need to open our eyes and hearts to the current needs of our community.

What excites you about MGUC, or Rexdale right now? But don't tell me now. This sermon will finish on March 3, at our Annual General Meeting. Come to the meeting prepared to share what we are called to do in 2019.

Amen.