

Unlikely Disciples
Matthew 4:12-23
First Presbyterian Church
January 26, 2020

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
¹⁶the 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.” ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”
¹⁸As 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 sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As 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. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.
²³Jesus 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.

Sermon¹

You know how you can think you know a Bible story
like the back of your hand?
You may have heard as a kid in Vacation Bible school...
and then several more times in sermons over the years...
(maybe even preached it in several sermons over the years?)
And then, all of a sudden something opens up
and you see it with new eyes?
Well, that happened to me this week
with the story of the disciples
out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee.
It's the middle of the night and pitch dark...
the wind picks up... the waves get rough...
the disciples are all scared...
and Jesus comes to them walking on the water.
They think he's a ghost... and have to ask if it's him.
And before you know it, Peter gets out of the boat
and starts walking towards Jesus on the water...
and you wonder, what on earth possessed him to do that?
WHY does he think he can walk on water?

¹ This sermon draws significantly on a video entitled “Dust” by Rob Bell for the series Nooma. It can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kM3qHBAekhg>

Well, as we have been learning from Professor Amy Jill Levine,
stories like this one make so much more sense
when you understand the Jewish background.

Jesus is a Jewish rabbi... with Jewish disciples...
living in a first century Jewish world.

These Jews believed that God had spoken to Moses –
and had given Moses the first five books of the Bible –
which they called the Torah.

Torah means “teaching” or “instruction”
or simply, “the Way.”

And so, Torah was the center...
the very foundation of their lives...
and it was also the sole curriculum
of their education system.

So, most Jewish children around the age of 6
would go to synagogue school to be taught the Torah.

This **FIRST LEVEL** of teaching was called “**Beit Sefer.**”

In Beit Sefer the kids would memorize the Torah...
and by the age of 10, they have it completely memorized...
Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy...
every word... memorized!

But, by the end of Beit Sefer...
somewhere around 10 years of age...
most kids were no longer going to synagogue school.

They were learning other things – apprenticing –
learning the family trade... the family business...
how to manage a household.

But the brightest and the best students...
(the ones who had the most natural ability)
would move on to the **NEXT LEVEL** of school
which was called “**Beit Talmud.**”

And in Beit Talmud they would memorize
the rest of the scriptures –
Genesis through Malachi –

(just to give you some perspective –
that’s 843 pages of small print in your pew Bible...
all memorized.)

Now, at the end of Beit Talmud – usually around age 14 or 15 –
most of **THOSE KIDS** were no longer in school.

They were back in their village with their families
apprenticing in the family trade.

But the best of the **BEST** of the **BEST**...
(those who had the highest aptitude and greatest potential)

they continued on to the next level of education
which was called "**Beit Midrash**" ...
and in Beit Midrash they would go to a RABBI
and apply to that rabbi
to become one of his "disciples."
Now, when WE think of a disciple
we think of a student...
someone who wants to study and learn what the rabbi knows.
But in Jesus' day, being a disciple went much deeper.
A disciple didn't just want knowledge,
he wanted to be like the rabbi...
to do what the rabbi did...
the disciple wanted to live his life
just like the rabbi lived his.

Now, it won't surprise you that different rabbis
had different ways of interpreting the Scriptures.
They would take a sacred text
and one rabbi might say, "I think this is what it means..."
and another rabbi would say, "No I think it means this."
So different rabbis had different ways
of interpreting and living out the commands of God...
and a particular rabbi's WAY was known as his "yoke."
You might remember the time Jesus said to his disciples:
"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me."
So, when you went and applied to a certain rabbi,
essentially you were saying you wanted
to take that rabbi's "yoke" upon you
so that you might LEARN what the rabbi knows
in order to DO what the rabbi does
so that you could BE who the rabbi is.
So, you would go to a rabbi and say,
"Rabbi, I want to become one of your disciples."
And then the rabbi would GRILL YOU.
He would ask you all kinds of questions about the Torah...
about the Talmud and Midrash...
lots of hard questions because the rabbi wants to know:
"Can this 15 or 16-year old kid sitting before me
learn what I know?
Can this kid do what I do?
Can this kid carry my yoke?
Does this kid have what it takes?"
Now if the rabbi fires off all these questions
and decides this kid ISN'T the best of the best...

he might say,
“Young man, it’s obvious that you love God
and that you know the Torah,
but you do not have what it takes to be disciple.
So, go with God... go back to your home and your family...
go back and keep learning your family trade...
keep serving God and working in your family business.
BUT...if the rabbi thinks THIS KID has GOT IT...
“You know, I think this kid can do it,”
then the rabbi would say, “Come, follow me.”
So, you would leave – as this 15/16 year old kid –
you would leave your village and home and family
and friends and synagogue –
you would leave all that and devote your entire life
to being like your rabbi...
to learning what he knows...
to doing what he does.

In Jesus’ day,
THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A DISCIPLE.

So, imagine a rabbi is traveling around -
he’s got his little pack of disciples
that have devoted their lives to going where he goes
and doing what he does...
so imagine they’re all trying to keep up with him
as he’s traveling around on these hot, dusty roads.
Well, at the end of the day
they’re going to be covered with the dust...
dust that was stirred up by their rabbi’s feet.
And there was this saying that developed among the sages –
almost like a blessing – you would say,
“May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi.”

Now all of this has huge implications
for how we understand Jesus...
because most rabbis would begin their teaching
around the age of 30...
and in our text this morning –
it’s around the age of 30 that Jesus
is walking around the shore of the Sea of Galilee
when he comes across Simon and Andrew
who are FISHERMEN.
And Jesus says to them, “Come, follow me.”
Well, if they’re fishermen...

and Jesus calls them to follow him...
that means they're not following any other rabbi.
And if they're not following any other rabbi,
then they weren't the best of the best...
they weren't good enough...
they didn't make the cut.

Yet, Matthew says,
"Immediately, they dropped their nets and followed him."

Which, when you think about it is a bit strange.
It's odd, isn't it, that they would just drop 'em and go?
But if we understand all this in its Jewish context,
it makes perfect sense.

I mean, rabbis were the most highly RESPECTED...
the most REVERED people in all Israel.
Only the "best of the best of the best" get to be rabbis.
And THIS rabbi... comes down the beach...
and says to YOU... a fisherman...
"Come, follow me."

What is he saying?
He's saying, "You know, I think you can do this...
I think you can learn what I know...
I think you can do what I do...
I think you can be like me."

Well, if you're a fisherman and a rabbi says THAT...
what else can you do but drop your nets and follow him?

And then, the text continues...
it says he comes across James and John
who are also fishing with their father, Zebedee.
Now again... if they're fishing with their father...
that means they're apprentices in the family trade...
and if they're apprentices
that means they are not the disciples of another rabbi.
And if they're not the disciples of another rabbi,
that means James and John didn't make the cut either...
they're not the "best of the best" either.

And how old are these guys, anyway? Fifteen? Sixteen?
Twenty at the most?
These are not old men... they are young...
they don't have a lot of education and life experience...
and yet, Jesus chooses THEM...
because his movement is for everybody –
for rich and for poor,

young and old,
for the educated and not so educated...
for men and women.

This is a movement of the “anybodies” –
the “not-good-enoughs” –
yet, as we know...
these “anybodies” change the course of human history.

So, back to the walking on water story –
you have this boat full of “not good enoughs” -
and the wind is howling and the water is choppy
and they’re all terrified.

Jesus comes to them looking like a ghost...
and Peter says, “Lord, if it really is you,
then tell me to come to you on the water.”

Now, why do you think this is Peter’s first thought?
Why is Peter’s first reaction,
“If it’s you, tell me to come to you?”

It’s because he’s a disciple... and that’s what disciples do.
He’s oriented his whole life
to doing what his rabbi does –
and so, he sees his rabbi walking on water
and what’s the first thing he wants to do –
“I want to be just like my rabbi
and walk on water too!”

So, Peter climbs out of the boat (the ONLY ONE who does it!)
and starts walking on the water.

And everything’s going fine,
but then he starts to sink and he yells out,
“Jesus, save me.”

And the text reads that Jesus immediately caught him...
and said, “You of little faith. Why did you doubt?”

Now, I always assumed that Peter doubts Jesus. Right?
That’s what we’ve always been told...
that Peter doubts Jesus.

But Jesus isn’t sinking!
So, who does Peter doubt?
He doubts himself.
He loses faith in himself...
that he can actually do what his rabbi does.

What Peter forgot... is that Jesus is his rabbi...
and a rabbi only takes disciples
he thinks have what it takes to be like him.

Jesus even reminded them of this at one point –

he said, "Remember, you didn't choose me, I chose you.
I, the rabbi, chose YOU."

And the rabbi doesn't choose you
unless the rabbi believes you can be like him.

All our lives we've heard about believing in God...
but what about God believing in us?
All our lives we've been told
how we just need to have faith in God...
but what about God having faith in us?

Having faith in Jesus is important,
but what about Jesus having faith in us?
I mean, he MUST have had faith in his disciples
– those "anybodies" –
because he leaves it all in their hands.

It's to THEM he says:
"Now, you go and make more disciples...
you baptize them...
and you teach them all this stuff I've taught you."

He leaves it in their hands... and THEY DO IT!

Apparently, we can be the kind of people God created us to be...
people of love, compassion, peace, forgiveness, hope...
people who try to do the right thing all of the time;
even when nobody is looking...
people who act on the opportunities we have everyday
for good and beauty and truth.

Apparently, we can live as Jesus lived.

Sometimes it's easy for us to get down on ourselves –
to feel "not good enough"
or feel like we don't have what it takes.
But hear this – Jesus the rabbi – has searched for YOU...
he has searched for and found YOU...
and he has said to you, "Come, follow me.
Come, learn from me.
Come, be like me."

You may not be the best of the best of the best...
I'm certainly not!

But he believes in you...
he believes in me...
he believes that we can be like him.

So, as his disciples we follow HIS WAY,
may we be covered with the dust of our rabbi.