

Called: From What to What

Last Sunday, John's gospel depicted the circumstances under which Jesus began to gather those who would become his disciples. After his death, there were many stories shared about Jesus and his life and ministry. The first were not written down until about thirty years after Jesus' death so the writers of the gospels gathered those stories from various communities of believers. This process is actually mentioned in the opening of Luke's gospel. John's gospel was the last written and came from a particular community of believers. This might account for the differences we find. The gospel reading this morning from Matthew gives a very different account of the circumstances and ways in which Jesus began gathering his disciples. In both passages, the actual interaction between Jesus and those who joined him is preceded by background information which sets the scene for this interaction. When we read John's gospel, Jesus is still spending time, at least several "next days" are used in the narrative. His identity as God's son is established by the testimony of John the Baptist, and that witness to who Jesus is becomes the reason the first who become disciples follow him. They are curious about this "Lamb of God" and want to know more. They ask a question and are invited to "come and see" where Jesus is staying and they go with him. The scene and circumstances that Matthew describes before Jesus initiates the call that he does are very different. To begin with, John the Baptist is now in prison. The text from Matthew is really very brief and compressed for such an eventful passage. That it begins with the news of John the Baptist's imprisonment is rather ominous. In verses 12 and 13 we have Jesus' reaction to this news. "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea." Capernaum might be considered the backwaters of the region; a small village away from the more populous areas. It was certainly off the beaten path. This could be considered a retreat from the danger posed by Herod to those who had a message like John the Baptist's. Yet, it is when John is put in prison, that Matthew records: "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" That message was not so different from the one John proclaimed. After this prelude to what is subtitled Jesus' calling of his first disciples, Matthew then tells us Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee as his background for this gathering of disciples. Like many of our texts there is no indication how much time Jesus has been in the area of Capernaum, but it was a small fishing village where the inhabitants' source of living would have been fishing. The walk from the synagogue which was there to the shore is a matter of a very short walk. If Jesus had been in the village for any length of time, he would have been known to those who lived there. Jesus' withdrawal as presented in Matthew seems to be rather an intentional time to consider God's call. Because although this text is almost always presented to be about those whom Jesus calls—it is also the story about the effects of God's call. God's call upon John the Baptist was answered, even though it led to his imprisonment. The Matthew presents Jesus' own call to the crowd to

perceive and become a part of God's in-breaking kingdom by their repentance and return to God's ways. This is then followed by Jesus' call to a few specific fishermen, those he has called as his disciples to catch up all kinds of people in the net of God's grace. When he begins gathering these disciples, he then begins showing them and the crowds the nature of the kingdom whose nearness he has been proclaiming by teaching, preaching and healing. There are different kinds of callings, yet each one is from God. Yesterday at the Presbytery Meeting the Committee on Preparation presented to the assembled group someone who has entered the process of ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. She was there to move from the first or inquirer stage to that of candidate. This movement focuses on the "call story" of the individual; you relate the stages in your journey which have led you to pursue this path of vocation. The call from God which leads to ministry is an important theological concept. It is often the one at the center of the preaching, teaching and other aspects of life in ordained ministry. Perhaps this is because as a minister one has the luxury of working in an occupation where faith, work, family and many other dimensions of life all come together. The concept of being called by God into that path is one that is universally accepted. An individual, at various times may wonder if they are called, but they do not wonder if ministry is a calling. Unfortunately, it is often felt that being "called" is reserved for those who go into ordained ministry. This is a very real problem, because God has a calling for everyone. Many people have a hard time seeing a direct connection between what they do and what they believe, which is why they don't feel they are called. But the calling of God is less about what we do as an occupation than who we are—God's claimed people. God's call isn't simply to do something, but it is rather to be something, a child of God. Maybe being comes before doing. Maybe being even makes doing possible. Perhaps that it was God's call that made it possible for John to keep proclaiming that the Messiah was soon to appear and to challenge the powers that be—the Pharisees and Sadducees and their leadership as well as King Herod even when it meant his imprisonment. Was it his knowledge that God had called him to be a forerunner? When Jesus withdrew to Capernaum he continued proclaiming John's message, but according to Matthew it wasn't until he walked by the sea and spotted those brothers that his true ministry began. The call he made is recorded this way: "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 sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.'" We are not told that either of these two men knew anything about Jesus and his identity as the Messiah. Yet their response is recorded: "Immediately they left their nets and followed him." This process is repeated again with the brothers who are the sons of Zebedee. Their response is the same. We do not know what summoned such an immediate response from these men; how they felt the call which was made. At this point, they probably have no idea what being "fishers of people" even means. But what they do know is that Jesus has seen something in them, something of value and worth. They have no idea where they will go, or

what they will do, but they do know that Jesus is calling them to come with him and be his disciples. They trust that the rest will become clear in time on their journey. There is a book called Twelve Ordinary Men by John MacArthur¹ which has a much longer title. The author takes each of the disciples and presents them as the individuals they were before and after their encounter with Jesus. The complete title of the book is: Twelve Ordinary Men: How the Master Shaped His Disciples for Greatness and What He Wants to Do with You. None of these men when called were anything but ordinary people, living ordinary lives. But they were called to be disciples; just as we all are called to be disciples. If we are open to that, to being the called children of God, then that word “called” no longer applies to just folks who have gone to seminary and walked through the process to be ordained. If we are open to that concept, if we accept that the call to us to “Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people” applies to us as well, then we might find ourselves like the first disciples, surprised by where that might take us. The destination may not be clear but we are to trust that in time what we are meant to do will become clear. I believe that we are all called and certainly the call is not always to stand in a pulpit. However there are all kinds of things to do in response to God’s call on a life. Maybe the response for a particular individual will come through an aspect of their work—through teaching or being a witness in their workplace. Maybe the response to their call will come through working as a volunteer. Maybe the response to God’s call is just living according to the teachings which Jesus gave to his disciples and others—by living out the calling in word and deed—through relationships. That God’s call is unique to the child of God that has been claimed. It is important to remember that however God chooses to use us—all of us—that before we are called “to do” anything we are called to be something. And that something is God’s own beloved children following the teachings of his Son. If we do this we can be assured that God will give what is needed knowing this the rest will follow. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

¹ John MacArthur, Twelve Ordinary Men. Thomas Nelson Press (2006)