

“Not as Easy as It Looks”

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Based on Mark 10: 32-45 and Matthew 4: 12-22

Is there anyone out there who could show up at your office or home tomorrow and cause you to drop everything in your life and leave for a new adventure? That was the premise of a reality TV show last year on the Travel Channel called a “1,000 Places to See Before You Die.” The creators searched for a couple willing to drop everything, leave their jobs, throw their possessions in storage, say goodbye to family and leave in short order on travel the world.

Earlier this month, the LSU Tigers football team won the college football national championship. During the run-up to the championship game LSU had to deal with the distraction that their coach, Les Miles, might leave to coach the University of Michigan team. Michigan was Miles’ safety net - the one school everyone thought he would drop everything for. So when Miles signed a new contract in 2006, LSU included a specific clause that if Michigan called and Miles left to go there, LSU would receive \$1.25M compensation. Though in the end, Miles dropped his safety net and stayed at LSU.

Is there a call that if it were to come tomorrow, would cause you to drop everything?

Hold that question as we consider the actions of the early disciples in our second lesson, from the 4th chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Reading now from God's Holy Word.

Let us pray, God center our hearts and open our minds to your eternal word for us.

Help us to know that you will never drop us, for your love leads us to the sacred in life.

In Jesus name we prayer, Amen.

So you want to know how the church of Jesus Christ got started?

On Pentecost Sunday we'll read Luke's account, but as Matthew tells it, the church began with a group of fisherman accepting Jesus' offer to stop fishing for dinner and join Him in fishing for people. Matthew 4 recounts the earliest stage of the organized group of Christ's followers. Much as Christ came into the world when God's Word became flesh, the first messianic community came into being when four fishermen, Peter, Andrew, James and John, listened to what Jesus had to say and dropped what they were doing to respond to Jesus' Word.

We read this text and wonder why. The disciples lived at a time when usually the privileged were chosen to study with rabbis. So for a few Jewish fishermen on the Sea of Galilee to have the opportunity to learn from one was special, but were the

disciples so disappointed with their jobs and lives as fishermen that they were willing to drop everything at the opportunity to do something different? What did they see in Jesus? Matthew records a few lines earlier that Jesus was urging people to repent. That doesn't sound very fun. The text doesn't give us many insights into the mindset of the fishermen.

When the followers of Christ first began to organize they didn't have a history of Christian community to fall back on. So the broader religious culture they were a part of tells us a lot about how they might be feeling.

Religion in that ancient world was partly about God's covenant with Israel and partly about getting stuff. If a person wanted long life, good health, growing crops, they worshiped for it. Dr. Craig Hill explains that to many, religion was "a sort of vending machine. You put in time and hopefully got something out."

Religion was also about God's covenant with Israel. God's presence was seen prominently in the law, the life of the rabbis and the Temple. Status in that world came from being seen as close to God. Or as Dr. Brent Holmberg puts it, in the religious life of that time, "authority was about the perceived proximity to the sacred." I like that – "proximity to the sacred."

Peter, Andrew, James and John dropped their nets but not their culture's religious influences when they joined Jesus in that early messianic community.

They continued to see religion as about getting stuff and being close to the sacred. We see this clearly in Mark's Gospel. Mark 8, 9, and 10, contain a pattern. Jesus predicts his passion and death, then the disciples don't like what Jesus is saying so they ask him for things, often to be close to him. And then Jesus answers them by staying if you want to be close to the sacred, you have to sacrifice and serve. In Mark 8, Jesus taught that the "Son of Man must undergo suffering...be rejected...and be killed." Peter responded by "taking Jesus aside and rebuking him." What Jesus was saying didn't correspond with Peter's notion of Messianic divinity. Jesus then said if any want to become "my followers, deny yourselves and take up your cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the Gospel will find it." Then in Mark 9, Jesus predicts that he would be betrayed and killed. But Mark writes again that the disciples did not understand what he was saying. So Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And then in our first lesson in Mark 10, the pattern repeats itself, Jesus predicts that the "Son of Man will be...condemned to death..." This time James and John don't like what Jesus is saying and they ask that Jesus let them sit next to him in his glory. So

Jesus said once again, "Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all, for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."

Jesus' bottom line was that being Christ's disciple is not about getting, it's about giving. And he redefines what it means to be close to the sacred. The sacred in Jesus' world is in the serving and the sacrifice.

Was that what the disciples thought they were signing up for that day on the banks of the Galilee when they dropped their nets, left their jobs and embarked on a new quest of learning?

Probably not. In a society where religious practice promised to get you stuff and bring you in close proximity to God, the disciples were likely expecting more immediate gratification than struggle.

What the disciples found was that the messianic community that Jesus was about was not as easy as it looked.

The philosophy that Jesus imparted over and over and over again in Mark, in Mathew and throughout the Gospels has relevance to us – that the sacred is in the struggle. That those who want to be first, that is nearest, closest, most proximate to God, much be willing to be last, that is a servant. Real proximity to the sacred in Jesus' world involves our giving of ourselves to those around us.

There are plenty of places in this life where you can experience instant gratification. If you want to experience immediate gratification, our culture gives you endless choices with your television clicker, your telephone and your computer. But you are interested in something more significant for your life. If you were not interested in finding something lasting and sacred, you wouldn't be in church today.

Finding that which is significant in life always takes longer and requires some sacrifice from us. If it didn't, we wouldn't appreciate it as much.

John F. Kennedy once said of space travel that we go to the moon, "not because it's easy but because it's hard." Last Monday we set aside a sacred day in our nation to celebrate the service and sacrifice of Dr. King.

Serving brings us closer to the sacred in life because the focus is not on us. When we drop our safety nets, we expose a deeper part of ourselves. We find that in our volunteering for the floating homeless shelter, Souper Bowl or Miriam's kitchen or in volunteering for one of our campus ministries. We know that taking ourselves out of our comfort zones, like rising at 6:00am to prepare meals for strangers or greeting someone you don't know at church may not be immediately gratifying. But that's the point. Jesus is saying that His religion is different from the prevailing culture.

There is a great story that the Christian evangelist Tony Campolo tells about how he was once asked to speak at a church service at a Pentecostal college. "Before the service, eight men had Campolo kneel so they could place their hands on his head and pray for Campolo and his upcoming speech. Campolo was glad to have the prayer, but one of the men didn't pray for Campolo, he prayed for someone else. This annoyed Campolo because he, after all, was the main speaker that day. The man said, "Dear Lord, you know Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives in that silver trailer down the road a mile off exit 14a. You know the trailer, Lord," and he proceeded to describe the exact location of the trailer. Campolo writes that he wanted to interrupt the man and tell him that God already knew where the guy lived and didn't need directions, but he just knelt there. The prayer went on: "Lord, Charlie told me this morning he's going to leave his wife and three kids. Step in and do something, God. Bring that family back together." When the prayer time ended, Campolo went on to preach at the college chapel, got in his car and began to drive home. As he drove onto the Pennsylvania Turnpike, he saw a hitchhiker and felt compelled to pick him up. They drove a few minutes and I said: 'Hi, my name's Tony Campolo. What's yours?' He said, 'My name is Charlie Stoltzfus.' Campolo couldn't believe it! That was the man that one of the individuals back at the college had prayed for. So he got off the turnpike at exit 14a and headed back to town. Stoltzfus got a bit uneasy with that and after a few minutes he said, 'Hey mister, where are you taking me?' I said, 'I'm taking you home.' He narrowed his eyes

and asked, 'Why?' Campolo said, 'Because you just left your wife and three kids, right?' That blew him away. Campolo, remembering the directions to the trailer, drove him right back home. When he opened the trailer door his wife exclaimed, 'You're back! You're back!' He whispered in her ear and the more he talked, the bigger her eyes got. Campolo spent two hours with the couple. The two reconciled and today Charlie Stolfus is a pastor in California.

Each of us has our own safety-nets that we rely on, and sometimes they can separate us from our opportunities to find the sacred in others.

Significant moments for Campolo came in some long prayers, a long drive and in the risk he took in welcoming a stranger into his life, because they put him in a position to experience a sacred moment that changed a life.

What if when Jesus called to the disciples he had told them, "If you drop your safety-nets and come with me, things are going to be hard. You may be ostracized and outcast, but you will change lives and find your significance along the way." Would they still have dropped it all and followed Jesus? We don't know.

Ultimately, you can only choose the path for your own life. But if you are searching for what is sacred in life - drop your nets, and let's go fishing. Amen.