

“What We Leave Behind”

Psalm 27:1, 4-9 and Matthew 4:12-23

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Even before the pandemic the theme of change has been one that has repeatedly returned and returned to my life in sermons, in prayers, in my daily personal reflections. Now, nearly three years after the pandemic began, I find myself more resistant to change than ever. . I thought that the increased pace of change would help me get used to it, embrace it even... but instead I find myself exhausted by uncertainty- wanting nothing more than to cling to what is familiar, comforting, and routine.

So, this year, these familiar words of Matthew’s gospel; Jesus calling the first disciples is far more jarring than it has ever been. Because as I try to cling to what is familiar, Matthew tells the story of these disciples walking away from what they have always known to follow Jesus’ call.

From this story, we learn something important about the nature of being called, as we all are, to be disciples. In order to respond to God’s call in our lives we have to leave something behind. This is a difficult thing for us to fathom. Our inclination is not to leave things behind but just to pile on! Why can’t I just add following Jesus to my already extensive to do list, I can divide my time and keep all the same responsibilities- Can’t we fish for people and fish? We don’t have to give anything up, we’ll just add more. What could go wrong? If you, like me, have ever piled WAYYYY too much on your plate- you know from experience that a good deal could go wrong. Yet time and time again, I find myself resistant to leaving anything behind and I fall into the trap of adding more and more.

Today I’m inviting all of you to consider what it is in your life that you might need to leave behind in order to follow your calling faithfully? Rather than trying to cram more into your busy schedules and lives, what might God be calling you to release? What might you take off your plate? And what might be hard about that change?

There are two things that keep us from making the choice to leave something behind even when it helps us to live more faithfully. One is fear. And the truth is, the disciples we see leaving

their nets behind had plenty of legitimate reasons to be afraid. But they trusted that with Jesus they could do good for themselves and their people- they might not have imagined they'd do good for the whole world, but they did. I imagine there were times where they were afraid, there were definitely times where they were in danger, even mortal danger, but they were also able to be fully alive in the presence of God.

The truth is as much as we try to cling to what we know, as much as we try to stave off the forces of change; change is an inevitable part of life. We can't choose whether or not to face change, but we can decide to be an active participant in the change; faithfully listening for what God is calling us to do and figuring out what needs to change to follow that path: What is serving us and the world? What is no longer serving us? What do we leave behind?

Simon, Andrew, James, and John were local Galileans who had probably grown up watching their families make their living off the sea. It's probable that they thought this is what they would be doing for the rest of their lives. It offered stability, which was not always easy to come by in the ancient world and not to be taken for granted. It also tied them to the economic systems of exploitation of the Roman Empire. Jesus calls them into a different system, one where human beings are valued more than profits.

And so at the call of Jesus they leave it all behind and follow. They follow even though they don't know where Jesus will lead them, they follow even though they can be pretty certain that he will not lead them to steady gainful employment, stability, comfort, or safety. They let go of their nets and hold instead to the Word of Christ.

If you're able to overcome the obstacle of fear on the path to change, there is another obstacle that is far more subtle and sometimes difficult to recognize: it's Guilt.

Simon, Andrew, James, and John don't only leave behind jobs. James and John specifically leave their father in the boat. They, as individuals, are not the only ones affected by this change.

In the first weeks and months after my son, Teddy, was born it was easy to drop everything that my life had been before and exist exclusively in that world of being a new parent. It was easy because I didn't really have a choice, all I had energy to do was to care for my child. But as the weeks and years have continued, moving beyond that all-consuming newborn stage, I've had to figure out what life looks like for me in this utterly new season of life.

I knew that things would have to change, of course; I knew that I wouldn't be able to settle back into life the way it was before. But there were things I did not foresee; I didn't foresee that my relationships would change. Some have become deeper, others have faded not with any conflict or falling out, just a gentle shift. A few weeks ago, right after my evening prayer practice, I was feeling guilty about the friends I hadn't reached out to for a while; the people I didn't get to visit with over the holidays, the people I haven't kept up with since my time became so occupied with family and a child. As the guilt washed over me, I suddenly had a

thought, and I like to think it was a Holy Spirit thought or nudge. It was a little voice that said “Maybe it’s ok.”

“Maybe it’s ok to focus your energy on fewer people in this time of life.”

“Maybe it’s ok to lose touch with people- who are also growing and changing and forming new relationships of their own.”

The call of James and John is now different from that of their father, and I hope that they gave themselves grace for that; I hope they knew that in that season of their lives it was ok. I hope for their father it was ok.

“Maybe it’s ok to do less. Maybe it’s ok to let go.”

In a book by Noah benShea called *Jacob the Baker*, a person in Jacob’s village asks the following question:

How can we have more? The response is this:

“The only way I can take a breath is by releasing my breath. In order to be more, I must be willing to be less.”

As we consider the questions, I raised at the beginning of this sermon I’d like us to do a breath prayer together. A breath prayer is a simple prayer that follows the movement of the breath. It’s a good reminder that when we pray, we pray not only with our words, but with our whole selves. Go ahead and start noticing the movement of your breath in and out. In and out. When I say the phrase *In order to be more*, fill your lungs with air, and when I say *I must be willing to be less* release your breath. As we pray, you may become aware of something you need to leave behind. On your exhale, I invite you to visualize releasing whatever that is and letting it go. Let us pray:

In order to be more

I must be willing to be less.

In order to be more

I must be willing to be less.

In order to be more

I must be willing to be less.

In order to be more

I must be willing to be less.

Breathe in Christ’s love

Release your fear and your guilt.

Breathe in Christ's peace

Release whatever you don't need to carry anymore.

In order to be more

I must be willing to be less.

In order to be more

I must be willing to be less.

Breathe in Christ's grace

Leave the rest behind.

Count to 7

Amen.

What are we being invited to leave behind?

Although we've explored this conversation as individuals, we will likely be called to explore it together as a community of faith as well. As Kim guides us all through this interim time, she'll be working on helping the congregation lean into that mission statement that Market Square has faithfully discerned to be our calling. Together we will need to consider what is serving that mission, and what is ok to release and let go. Sometimes this can be uncomfortable work. When it gets uncomfortable, I hope you will remember Simon, Andrew, James, and John leaving their nets and walking ashore. You may notice your fear popping up, you may notice your guilt and when you do, I hope you will return to this simple breath prayer and remember that Christ walks with us in all difficulty leading us to life and light. Would you pray with me?