

Matthew 4:12-23

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, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the 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.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

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.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus 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.

Beginnings - January 22, 2022

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So here we arrive at the actual start of Jesus' earthly ministry. Up to now, everything has been prelude. From Advent, where we learn what kind of Messiah Jesus is going to be, through Christmas, when we learn of his birth under humble circumstances, through his baptism and his affirmation from God that He is indeed the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Emmanuel, God with Us — up to now, we've really been talking about what might happen.

But now, Jesus is ready and he begins.

All four gospels have a story of how Jesus started proclaiming the good news. They differ somewhat in detail. However, what they all have in common is the Jesus called four men to follow him, and they responded.

Now this is interesting. In Matthew's account, which we read today, it seems like Jesus was just walking along the Sea of Galilee, saw some guys fishing, and invited them to follow — total strangers as it were. In Luke's account, he indicates that Jesus had been living in the village of Capernaum and had interacted with several of them before inviting the first four to follow him. No matter. What is important is first, what Jesus asked them to do, and second, the fact that they all said yes.

In a way, the church today faces a situation not terribly different from what Jesus faced two thousand years ago. Just like today, a large majority of people believed in God. Just like today, there was a lot of dissatisfaction with the organized religion — they weren't getting much out of it. Just like today, there was a longing, a hunger for something new, something fresh, a new way of looking at how God interacted with humanity.

Clearly for Peter, Andrew, James, and John, they saw something in Jesus that was very different from what they were used to. Whether they had just met him, as Matthew's gospel implies, or had known of him for a while, as Luke's implies, when Jesus invited them to follow, they made the decision on the spot to give up their work as fishermen and learn to become what Jesus promised they would turn into: fishers of men. Quite a change! A change few of us are in a position to make ourselves. Or are we?

Let's explore the nature of Jesus calling of his first four disciples. As we will see, Jesus' call is quite different from the way churches of all kinds call people today.

Nowadays, churches seek to reach people by talking about their programs; come here, we have a great youth ministry. Come here, our choir is second to none. Come here, we have an outreach to

the people of Camden that is winning followers all the time. Come here, we have a liberal interpretation of the Bible, or we have a conservative interpretation, or we have a literal interpretation, or we speak in tongues, or we believe women should be ordained, or we believe women should not be ordained. You get the picture.

But Jesus did not take that approach. He did not tell people what he believed or what his message was going to be or whom he would accept or whom he would reject. All he said was two words, "Follow me."

Those two words are extremely important because they, more than anything else we do here at CPC are at the heart of what it means to be the Church. Follow me.

For too long a time, we in the church have looked at ourselves in two ways. First, we see ourselves as a fellowship organization. We exist because we are a gathering point for friends and families. To an extent, this is true of all congregations. Many people have been and continue to be associated with Collingswood Presbyterian Church because their families were — no matter how long ago. We all know of people who have not set foot inside this room for years who, when asked, would say CPC is my church. Moreover, if they have need of a place to conduct a baptism, a wedding, or a funeral, we are first on the list because their father, mother, or great aunt attended here back in 1972. Now don't get me wrong, we are all for people encouraging their families and friends to come here to CPC, but promising close fellowship is not how Jesus began his ministry.

The other way we look at the church is that we are agents of change. We at Collingswood have an active mission committee. We have an active board of Deacons. We have had members who went on mission trips and visited unusual places on behalf of the church. Our church, like most churches, has certain worldly causes we have been involved with: food pantries, homeless shelters, housing for families, backpacks for school children — all good and wonderful things. But note, Jesus did not greet his first disciples with the words, "Follow me, and we'll make sure the hungry are fed, or the oppressed are freed, or the strangers are welcomed." No Jesus did not begin his ministry with a call to social justice and mission.

No question, fellowship and mission are important parts of who we are and what we are about. However, if that is all we are, then truly, how is Collingswood Church different from any other fellowship or service organization in town? If having friends and advocating for causes is all we're about, then why should anyone want to be part of us? There's plenty of other ways to get involved in our community — less controversial ways, I might add.

Jesus first and foremost did not call his disciples into fellowship. He did not call them into mission. Instead, Jesus called his followers into relationship. "Follow me."

Jesus was calling them to form a lasting, personal bond with him that transcended mere fellowship and mere mission work. Rather, Jesus invited his disciples to fully participate and share in his life. He asked his disciples not to show up for worship once a week or to get involved in a committee, or distribute blankets once or twice a year. Jesus offered them a level of personal bonding that was far, far more than what they could experience in their everyday lives.

Friends, for too long, we have seen our worship, our fellowship, our mission as ends in themselves. I am proud and pleased that at Collingswood, we do worship well. We do fellowship well. We do mission well. We do our zoom Bible Study and Taizé services well. We do our Sunday school well, given the constraints of our size and our budget. This is great.

But what we and most churches lose sight of is not the what we do, but why we do it. Why do we worship? Why do we fellowship? Why do we serve the community? Why do we educate youth and adults alike? Why? Because Jesus asks us to have a relationship with Him.

When our worship strengthens our relationship with Jesus, we are following Him. When our fellowship together strengthens our relationship with Jesus, we are following Him. When our mission and outreach strengthens our relationship with Jesus, we are following Him. When our educational programs strengthen our relationship with Jesus, we are following Him. Otherwise, all the time, all the money, all the prayer, all the effort we put into doing these things is meaningless, because they do not result in our building, maintaining, and strengthening our relationship with Jesus.

It is much easier, in our rational, logical, fact-driven twenty-first century world to ignore the spiritual dimension of our lives. Our senses, we can deal with. Our possessions, we can deal with. Our workplaces, we can deal with. Our neighborhoods and communities, we can deal with. They are visible, they are obvious, they respond to our actions.

Spirituality is different. To have a relationship with Jesus, a relationship of the kind He proposed to his disciples, requires us if not to reject the evidence of our senses, at least consider new and different ways of interpreting our lives and our living. It's a hard thing: to open our spiritual side to Jesus. It means frankly admitting to ourselves that there is much of life that we simply do not understand and more importantly, cannot deal with on our own. For those who follow Jesus Christ, like those first disciples did, we are letting go of the illusion that we are somehow in control of what

is going on around us and we must, by necessity, accept that we need something more in life to make sense out of reality.

Jesus said to his disciples, “Follow Me.” Jesus says to you, “Follow Me.” Jesus says to Collingswood Presbyterian Church, “Follow Me.” If we say, “Yes,” to Jesus, then what does following mean?

To form a spiritual relationship with Jesus means to accept Him in your life as a continuous presence. Too often, it’s easy to regard our attendance at church or our relationship with Jesus in the same way we might look at an occasional visit to a neighborhood restaurant or a visit to Grandma’s. We go, we enjoy, we say hello, and then we leave, forgetting about the experience until the next time. We may have a spiritual relationship with Jesus that only operates during the hour or so we spend in this building: we come in, we worship, we go. Outside of the time spent in here, we seldom think about our relationship with Jesus unless we find ourselves or close friends and family in some real difficulty. Then we pray. Then we seek out church friends. Then, sometimes, we alert the pastor.

But the disciples did not see Jesus just once a week. No, they saw him all the time. They, as the song goes, “walked with [him], and talked with [him], and He told them they were His own.” In other words, Jesus was the main reality in their lives and the reality of Jesus exceeded the reality of their own senses. They gave their lives and their trust to Him, and He touched, transformed, and empowered them — just as Jesus can touch, transform and empower us right now.

The point of spirituality, the power of spirituality, our embrace of spirituality begins and ends with the idea that Jesus, though not physically present, is nevertheless as real to us now as he was to James, John, Peter, and Andrew. We can pray—not just when we’re in trouble, but all the time. We can study scripture—both here at church and online Tuesday evenings and in daily prayer. We can listen intently for the still, small voice guiding us. We can pay attention to the voices of friends and strangers alike guiding us on where to go and what to do. In short, we do have a choice as whether to regard participation in the life of this or any congregation like we would any other club or organization, or committing ourselves to follow Jesus as he asks, seeing him more clearly, loving him more dearly, and following him more nearly, day by day by day.

That is what Jesus asks. In return, he promises a way of thinking, living, and being far different and far better than anything we have experienced before. Those four followed—and their lives were changed forever. Follow, follow, follow—and your life will never be the same. Answer the call of Jesus. Answer the call. Answer.