

SERMON TITLE: "Jesus 101: Jesus & Vocation"

SERMON TEXT: Mark 3:13-19 and 6:6b-13 (Mk 1:16-20 & 2:13-14 were used in Children's Sermon)

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OCCASION: September 2, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

As you can see from the title printed in the bulletin, this installment of my "Jesus 101" sermon series is about "Jesus & Vocation." We United Methodists don't use the word "vocation" very much. In fact, when you first glanced at the title, some of you might have thought I was going to preach about Jesus going on "vacation." This is Labor Day weekend, after all, and lots of folks are taking advantage of their last summertime opportunity to get away before the fall schedule takes hold. Why not Jesus too?

If you've been here for the previous three sermons in this series, you've figured out that, in the early chapters of Mark, Jesus was a very busy guy and probably *was* already in need of a vacation. Almost as soon as he began preaching the good-news gospel, he also got to work healing all kinds of people who crowded around him with their many needs. Jesus devoted himself to this labor because he felt a tremendous sense of call from God. Mark chapter one tells us about Jesus' baptism, when he saw the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove and he heard God's voice saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Soon after, when John the Baptist was arrested and his message was silenced, Jesus realized he had to pick up the slack. God had *called* him to that work.

And that's what the word "vocation" means. You can think of it like "voice" or "vocalization." As the Gospel of Mark so clearly indicates, Jesus heard God's divine voice calling him into the ministry of preaching good news, calling him into the ministry of healing the sick, and calling him to interpret the law with compassion. And now, in this fourth sermon of the series, we see that Jesus used his own voice to call disciples to labor alongside him in God's work.

1—THE DISCIPLES' CALL STORIES

I think most of us have some familiarity with the call stories of the fishermen Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Those stories are told a little differently in each of the four gospels. This morning, you heard the summary version during the Children's Sermon. And we've all seen pictures like the one on the cover of the bulletin, where Jesus comes up alongside the fishermen at the edge of the sea. You get the impression that they and Jesus were total strangers until that moment when he called them to leave their boats, their nets, and their father so they could follow him and learn how to fish for people. I've always thought it was possible, though, that Jesus could have met them previously. We don't know anything about what Jesus was doing while he was in his teens and 20s. Maybe he had travelled to the Sea of Galilee before. Or maybe Jesus had met those guys at the temple in Jerusalem when they all were there for Passover or other Jewish holidays. But, whether the fishermen had ever met Jesus before or not, for some reason they trusted him. They were willing to give up their livelihood and all that familiarity of lifestyle to follow him on a very different journey.

Speaking of journey . . . Are you familiar with the term "journeyman"? My younger brother is an electrician, and I know he had to go through a journeyman phase of training before he could become a fully-licensed electrician. There are also journeymen plumbers, welders, and carpenters. Jesus called the four fishermen to follow him as journeymen preachers and healers. As they apprenticed with Jesus the Master, he prepared them for the day when he would no longer be at their side, and they would be fully empowered to do this work of God on their own.

Besides the blue-collar fishermen, Jesus also called white-collar workers like the tax collector. The children's Bible storybook referred to him as Matthew. Mark 2:14 calls him Levi, the son of Alphaeus. Every business, team, or organization needs someone who's good at details and who can manage the budget. The Gospel of Mark doesn't give us much more background about the 12 disciples, but the other gospels fill in a bit more. Some of Jesus' disciples had previously been followers of John

the Baptist. Judas Iscariot, at least, was a Zealot, which meant that he was willing to take up arms if necessary for his cause. It makes sense that Jesus called people from a variety of fields. They were able to bring a great deal of knowledge and skill to their work for God's kingdom. We can assume that some of those disciples Jesus called were older and had more wisdom gained from life experience. Others were younger and possibly had more energy and enthusiasm. But each one brought something to ministry that was beneficial.

That's good because Jesus didn't call those men just to sit around and listen to him or even just to walk around and watch him perform miracles. That observational time was essential, but Jesus also called them to get busy working. As Carl read to us from Mark chapters three and six, Jesus called them and appointed them to proclaim the message of repentance and good news, to cast out demons, and to anoint and heal the sick. Jesus sometimes sent them out two by two so they could get some practice. At first, those practice runs were to nearby towns and villages. After Jesus' death and resurrection, those missionary journeys and calls took the disciples to distant places.

An example of that was the disciple Thomas. We mostly remember him as "Doubting Thomas" for his doubts about Jesus' resurrection. But the long-held church tradition is that Thomas eventually went as a missionary all the way to India. If a guy who had doubts could be so motivated as to travel such a distance from Israel to India to preach the Christian gospel, he surely was a good choice. Jesus knew what he was doing when he called Thomas, and Thomas must have brought some wonderful attributes to his vocation of ministry.

2—OUR CALL STORIES TODAY

So, when we think about Jesus and vocation, we first think about his own call from God and the call that Jesus made upon disciples in his own day. But we should also recognize that the voice of Jesus is still calling us today—in a couple of ways.

One way Jesus calls us is into the vocation of full-time pastoral ministry. Every year, some ministers retire, and every year, some new clergy are needed to enter this field of work. In fact, in the United Methodist denomination, this need is great enough that the General Conference budgeted \$14 million since 2012 for the recruitment of new young clergy. In my experience, I've seen Jesus call young people in high school or college, who then focus their studies on religion and the ministry of the church. It's also quite common for Jesus to call an adult who already has worked in some other profession—maybe in the military or nursing or banking. That's a little trickier because those persons then have to return to school and incur additional debt. But, like the fishermen and tax collector, those second-career pastors bring with them a wealth of life experience.

I think sometimes, as a church, we forget that it's our job not just to raise up Christians but also leaders of Christians. When we notice that someone has the gifts and graces for ministry, we should allow Jesus to speak through us. We should allow Jesus to use our voice to commend and encourage those persons and suggest to them that God might have some important work for them to do. The vocalization of the call to ministry can come through each one of us, as we speak words like, "Have you ever thought of going into the ministry? I think Jesus might have a career plan for you." When we speak those words of call, we open up ideas and possibilities and allow Jesus' voice to be heard.

Of course, Jesus doesn't call everyone into full-time professional ministry. The vocation or calling that most people feel is to do the best job you can in your own field of interest. If your career is with the Forest Service, the IRS, Hill Air Force Base, or Weber State University, you can glorify God in your labors. If your career is repairing appliances, selling groceries, entering data into a computer, offering customer service over the telephone, nursing the sick and elderly, or teaching junior high, you can do God's work by keeping a positive attitude, practicing good ethics, and fulfilling your responsibilities with expertise. If your calling is to care for your own family and your own home, to go to school and do your homework, or to use your spare time as a volunteer, those are important vocations

too. In those roles and many more, you have opportunity to offer a challenge to what's wrong in the world, and you can offer a message of graceful good news to those who are hurting. In all the labors of laity, there is the opportunity to demonstrate the good work of Christian ministry in your deeds of compassion and advocacy.

Jesus absolutely can work through you in your vocation, as you witness to your co-workers, family, and neighbors what it means to be a person of Christian faith and integrity. As you keep a hopeful spirit, speak up for what's right, and offer prayerful and practical support to those in need, you serve in the world as an ambassador for Christ. As you invite others to participate in worship and other ministries of the church, you open the door of faith to them. You fulfill your calling by following Jesus' example, even as you earn your living in your own career.

CONCLUSION

I think one of the favorite hymns for many of us is "Here I Am, Lord." The lyrics of that hymn are based on the Old Testament story of the young boy Samuel, who heard God calling to him in the night. At first, Samuel thought he was hearing the priest Eli calling to him. But Eli said no, it wasn't him. After this happened a second and a third time, Eli realized what was going on. He then told Samuel that, if God called again, Samuel should say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

When we think about Jesus and vocation, we're talking about hearing and answering a call to engage in ministry. That might be as a professional church worker, or it might be through an intentional application of our Christian faith in another career. Even those who are retired have many opportunities to labor for the Lord. No matter how we spend the majority of our time, we can all do our part to represent the ministry of Christ. So, on this Labor Day weekend, let's celebrate how important our work is. Let's celebrate Jesus and vocation.