

THE GRACIOUS IMPERATIVE



JAMES EARL MASSEY

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. — Mark 1:16-20

I

Four hallowed names rise up like mountain peaks within this text: Simon, Andrew, James, John, four persons Jesus brought together and kept related across the rest of their lives by his purpose and planning. What a treasured account this is!

Simon, Andrew, James, and John: What honored names in Christian history! In reading Mark's all-too-brief report about these four, one wishes for more details about that crucial meeting when they heard and answered Jesus's call to follow and remain with him. As they introduced themselves during their ministries to changing audiences and shared their message in the midst of changing times, what a time of deep drama it must have been to hear any one of them tell what it felt like to become an intimate disciple of Jesus. We all know the subsequent history of these four men, but all those later and great ministry happenings only make this brief account of how their discipleship began all the more attractive, and all the more engaging.

Clive Sansom, a British poet, was sensing the drama that fills this account when he imaginatively put himself in Andrew's shoes and wrote:

Dr. James Earl Massey delivered this lecture during the Beeson Lectures February 18-20, 1997, held on the campus of Asbury Theological Seminary. His theme for the three-day series was "Preaching from the Inside-Out." Dr. Massey is a life trustee at Asbury Seminary and dean emeritus and distinguished professor-at-large at Anderson University School of Theology.

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...the water lay calm, unrippled,
 And no wind blew...
 It was then, with his own peace, he came.
 Simon and I were casting together,
 Thigh-deep in the liquid sunset.
 Herod's barge had passed in the distance.
 Whirling my weighted net about my head
 I watched it fall, open and spread
 Like the skirts of a dancer.
 As it sank to the lake-floor
 I pulled the cord and, the mouth closing,
 Was dragging it beachward... There he stood—
 Smiling seriously at our surprise—
 Jesus—last seen with the Baptist,
 Our dropped nets bulged on the pebbles.
 "Come with me... You will fish for people!"¹

David S. Bell, who has spent several years in ministry to youth, told of using this passage of the Bible at camps and youth retreats, and asking young people to list all the possibilities they can for why Simon, Andrew, James, and John left their boats—and their careers—to follow Jesus. One of the first answers was a typical teenager's response: they left their boats and went off with Jesus because they were bored with what they had been doing; they knew that they could always return to their fishing business. Another answer was that they were attracted to Jesus because of his growing popularity among the people; perhaps their own ambition to be recognized leaders moved them to become associated with him. A third answer carries us deeper; perhaps they were prodded by God's Spirit to trust and follow him— "They just knew from within that this was a call from God, which they didn't fully recognize until much later in life."²

Some years ago, while preaching in a college setting about the implications of following Jesus, I referred to the experience of James and John, his brother. Shortly afterward I received an envelope, sent by one of the English professors, and in it was a newly-crafted poem imaginatively depicting the emotions that might have been churning in Zebedee as he watched his two sons walk away from him and the rest of the work crew as they trailed off with Jesus. That professor captioned the poem "Zebedee's Complaint":

Along came that man, and without any warning,
 He ordered my sons (as if he had the right!)
 To get out of the boat, where we mended our fishnets,
 and go with him, with little regard for my plight.

I've labored for many years, building this business,
 And it's yielded a living—all a father could wish.
 But I did it for *them*, planned it all for *their* future,
 Taught them all of my skills. (People always need fish!)

He didn't consult me, this vagabond preacher.
It was I who begot them, and made of them men
To be proud of—responsible. Then in an eye-blink
He spoke, and they turned into children again.

His words had a note of finality. Clearly
No idle whim prompted his "Come, follow me."
For what foolishness have they abandoned their duties?
Will they ever come back to their life on the sea?

Oh, it hurts! I would not have believed they could do it—
In a trice, all my plans for their future erased.
They have scorned their inheritance, left all to follow
In the footsteps of one plainly mad. What a waste!

Whatever Zebedee's response might have been, we do know what his two sons did after hearing Jesus summon them: they accepted his call with openness to *why* he summoned them. Together with Simon and Andrew, they obediently followed Jesus and in time became what he promised to make them become.

Guided by our text, let us trace anew what it means to "follow" Jesus, and how following him readies us to live and labor with a sense of high purpose.

II

"Following" Jesus, also known as Christian discipleship, begins with an experience that associates us with Jesus. The ministry of Jesus was filled with the activity of meeting people, "calling" them into fellowship with himself. All who heard such a call felt an authority, a winsome, trust-inviting, and life-engaging authority.

Every call Jesus issued was uttered with graciousness. He spoke imperatively, yes, but every imperative was graciously issued, and what he asked bore the marks of inspiration and the distinct challenge of a high purpose. Every call Jesus issued grew out of his vision for the person he addressed; it made each respondent a candidate for a purposeful life. We see proof of this in what happened to Simon, Andrew, James, and John.

There is in the *Mishnah*, in the "Benedictions" (Berakoth) section of that treasured compilation of Jewish oral tradition about the Law, a passage in which a rabbi explained what it means to respond positively to God's word as one who hears it. According to that rabbi, to "hear," truly, is to take on the yoke of the kingdom of heaven; it is to willingly subject oneself to divine sovereignty and to let God fully order one's life.⁴ Jesus used that same image of the yoke when he invitingly said: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me" (Matt. 11:29a).⁵ Stating the matter of obedience to God as taking on a yoke was common in Judaism, but in this invitation Jesus had more in mind than helping someone become a better student of the Law. What Jesus said meant more because he spoke and speaks as God's calling Agent. He summoned hearers to yield their consent to God. This is what Jesus was asking of Simon, Andrew, James, and John when he issued that gracious imperative, "Follow me." This is what Jesus asks when he addresses us with his inviting word today.

III

The promise of Jesus to those four was that in following him they would *become* "fishers for people" (NRSV). Obedience in following, openness to learn, and loyalty to him was all that Jesus required to make them what he envisioned they could become.

Jesus had in mind a ministry for those four, a specialized service in his name. That ministry could not begin until they were made ready for it, and the promise of Jesus was that he would "make" them ready.

Ardent disciples do not seek their own ends, and effective ministers are never self-made. The Lord must be our central teacher, and only he can rightly prepare those who are to serve God's special interests. That preparation begins with being a "disciple," a learner at the feet of The Master. The educational systems of our time do not even hint at what this way of learning meant in that earlier day. In our time, students are concerned with facts, with acquiring knowledge, with completing prescribed courses, and getting distinguished grades, but in the time of Jesus, the teacher-student relationship had to do with learning a way of life. It involved a learning process that shaped a person's character and determined that person's future. The aim of the teacher was to implant learning, yes, but a learning that would imprint the character of the teacher upon the student's life. That is the blessing that Simon, Andrew, James, and John received and honored, and for which we honor their names. They accepted the plan of Jesus for their lives. The tragedy of Judas was that he resisted the Master's plan, filled with notions, motives, and a vision of his own. Trying to maintain control over his own life, make his own way and earn his own place, Judas fell into ruin.

Simon (Peter) later lapsed in discipleship and failed the Lord's trust of him by a string of selfish lies, anxious to save himself when he felt threatened. You remember the incident. How gracious Jesus was when he confronted Simon after that failure. He restored that chastened and repentant man to a place of intimacy as a disciple, and summoned him anew to the original task. Using the same words of call spoken earlier at the seaside, Jesus bade him "Follow me" (John 21:19b). Following Jesus has always meant obeying him, staying open to learn from him, and this happens when there is a loyalty to him that is rooted in gratitude and love.

Simon, Andrew, James, and John had special assignments awaiting them in the future. They would be sent to "fish" for people. This would demand an interest in people. Following Jesus finally readied those four to move effectively among people, armed with a God-inspired interest to help them. That is what any ministry is all about. All are called to "follow" Jesus, to be disciples of The Master and show the imprint of his character upon our lives, but some are destined for special ministries in his name in order to serve God's interest among the people. All of us should be willing to leave our "boats and nets" for his sake, but Jesus does not lay that demand upon all. I am reminded of the Gerasene demoniac whom Jesus healed; the delivered man was so grateful to Jesus that he "begged that he might be [remain] with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you'" (Luke 8:38-39). All are not called to leave a career and home when touched by the life of Jesus; some must remain at home and share their witness about him there.

IV

And now, one more item of prime concern: do not overlook *the grand partnership those four developed and enjoyed as disciples and ministers* because of Jesus. As Jesus passed by, saw these four, and called them, they were working in teams, aware of a common bond and a common task as they busily worked at the business of their day. This continued and deepened across the rest of their lives, and they were all blessed and enhanced because of it.

Sustained discipleship and creative ministry have always fared best when there has been a caring and responsible partnership between believers. How else could they have handled the multiple demands of "fishing for people"? Partnership strengthens character. Partnership generates trust and encourages openness. Yes, partnership is strategic because it guarantees community and enhances competence. Partnership between believers and those with specialized ministries promotes attentiveness to a shared vision and deepens commitment to an understood task. How else, I ask again, how else can the multiple demands of "fishing for people" be handled?

In speaking about "fishing for people" Jesus meant more than evangelistic efforts that call people to decision but go no further with regard to their lives and needs! Rightly understood, the metaphor about "fishing for people" is a comprehensive symbol that includes all the ministry functions necessary to fulfill kingdom demands and meet human needs.⁶ This expressive metaphor is a job description, on the one hand, and a call to unity, on the other. Even though Jesus chose this metaphor because he was addressing fishermen, the point remains the same: if the best is to result as we do an assigned work, then partnership in doing it is a must.

Interestingly, the fishing metaphor Jesus used initially when he called Simon, Andrew, James, and John, does not appear with prominence in the later record. Afterward, away from the seaside—which perhaps inspired his use of that metaphor, Jesus spoke of ministry in other ways. He sometimes used pastoral terms, as when, after the resurrection, he instructed Simon Peter "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17). Earlier, he had highlighted the evangelistic aspect of ministry when he told the disciples that the throngs of people were like "fields...ripe for harvesting" (John 4:35). Yes, Jesus described ministry in different ways. In that land of shepherds, he drew on shepherding as an image of the pastoral and nurturing aspects of ministry. In that land of many vineyards and crop-filled fields, he also spoke of sowing seeds and cultivating growth, he spoke about reaping, about sheaves and harvest, about gathering fruit and grain, using all these as metaphors of ministry. But whether Jesus referred to fishing, sowing and reaping, or leading and tending sheep, a labor was involved for which faithfulness was required, *with partnership*. In so doing, that illustrious company of four did not fail. If we follow Jesus faithfully, we, too, can succeed!

Daniel S. Warner understood this, and this song of his prods us to that needed industry, diligence, and partnership:

We will work for Jesus and adore the plan
That exalteth so a fallen race,
Joining with the Savior, doing what we can
To extend the wonders of his grace....

We will work for Jesus, we are not our own;
Jesus, we can never idle be;
Souls around us dying; purchased for thy throne;
We will gather all we can for thee.

[Let us] work for Jesus,
[Let us] work for Jesus,
[Let us] live for him who died for all;
[Let us] work for Jesus,
[Let us] work for Jesus,
Till we hear the final trumpet call.⁷

NOTES

1. From "Andrew," by Clive Sansom, *The Witnesses* (London: David Higham Associates, 1956), pp. 13-14.
2. David S. Bell, "A Fishing Story," in *Best Sermons 7*, edited by James W. Cox and Kenneth M. Cox (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), see pp. 19-20.
3. Maxine Loeber, "Zebedee's Complaint" (1994).
4. See *The Mishnah*, translated from the Hebrew by Herbert Danby (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), Berakoth 2:2, p. 3.
5. On some extra-canonical parallels to the invitational wording in Matthew 11:29a, see *Ecclesiasticus* 24:19-22 and 51:23-27.
6. On this as a comprehensive metaphor, see Wilhelm H. Wuellner, *The Meaning of "Fishers of Men"* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), esp. pp. 134-231.
7. "We Will Work for Jesus," Hymn Number 257 in *Hymnal of the Church of God* (Anderson, IN: The Warner Press, 1971).