

“Turning and Following”

(Matthew 4:12-25)

Dr. Randy Working
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Evelyne and I have always enjoyed stories where an older and wiser person takes a younger person under their wing to mentor them and shape their talent and passion for some art. It's a classic theme, and you see it in everything from Mr. Miagi teaching Daniel in “The Karate Kid,” to the warrior Henri Ducard of the League of Shadows teaching Batman to fight crime, to Merlin teaching the young Arthur, who's called “Wart” in the story. There's even another version of Merlin in the cartoon movie “Fantasia,” where a wizard comes to the rescue when Mickey's magic gets out of control and he floods the castle. Mickey realizes very quickly that he can't do it on his own.

Jesus said, a servant is not above his master, and this morning we look at what it means to follow the master. He calls us to repent—that's turn to him—and to be his disciple—that's follow.

Let me set the stage. Matthew tells us that John was put in prison, and that was the signal for Jesus to start his public ministry. God commissioned him, the devil tested him, John finished his mission, and now Jesus was ready. John had finished his work of preparing the way, and now Jesus set up his headquarters in Capernaum, a strategic town at a crossroads. Matthew lets us know a summary of Jesus' message, and it's the same as John's: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In other words, it's right here.

So he says, “Get your lives in order, because God's kingdom is coming.” The normal way of things is to give the message about the coming kingdom, to show it with God's power over sickness and demons, and to teach the way of Jesus.

So, Jesus begins by calling his inner circle of disciples, students, people who would follow his way of life. Look at the authority of his call. The fishermen might have been working-class, but they probably made a good living in their family business. Jesus tells them to follow, and they do—Matthew says, “immediately,” and James and John leave behind their father. That's impressive, especially in a society where the highest responsibility is honoring your parents. But Jesus calls his followers, and that means we're not our own any more. We belong to him now.

Look at one more thing that comes out of this passage: Jesus shows he has all the authority of God, and he shows that full gospel ministry not only tells the good news, but also shows it through acts of service. When we care about people's needs in Jesus' name, he puts lives back together and heals people, body and soul. If we're going to follow Jesus, we have to do what Jesus does and we have to know him, and I want to look at three things the passage brings out about him.

First, Jesus is the Light of the Nations.

As soon as John the Baptist gets arrested, Jesus starts his ministry in Galilee, the area of northern Israel/Palestine. Now, Galilee might have seemed like a strange place for Jesus to start. It's the most remote Jewish province. It's far from Jerusalem; it's a

political backwater, and it's spiritually distant from the center of Jewish religious life. Judeans thought Galileans weren't quite religiously pure. There was a big prejudice against the provinces on the part of the religious establishment in Jerusalem. It seemed so irrelevant. The Messiah was supposed to come out of Bethlehem in Judea. No wonder John's Gospel tells us Nathanael said, "Nazareth! Can anything good come out of there?" (John 1:46)

Even more, it was a revolutionary area. The city of Sepphoris was the center of the region, like a state capital today, a city that revolted against the Roman government. So when Jesus goes to Galilee, it might have seemed like he was heading off course.

That's the way God often works, in his upside-down kingdom, in the out-of-the-ordinary and the out-of-the-way. Isaiah the Old Testament prophet called it "Galilee of the Nations" (Isaiah 9:1), and that's because it's where the Jewish faith bumped up against the pagan world. It's where light meets darkness. Jesus lived with marginal people, on the frontier, on the border. He did it from the start. Remember who comes to worship him at the manger—it's the magi from the pagan east. Remember when Matthew puts together Jesus' genealogy in chapter one—he includes four women, something you never did in the first century, and one was a prostitute, and two were from outside of God's family. God takes the outsider and the outcast into his family.

You don't have to turn on a light when it's already a bright room. God was bringing Jesus the light of the world into the world because it's a dark place that needs God. Matthew makes that clear by quoting Isaiah,

The people living in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned. (Matthew 4:16; see also Isaiah 9:1-2)

So this scene sets the stage for his whole ministry. What's it about? It's about bringing people of all stripes into God's family. He says, "Turn from your sins and turn to God, because the Kingdom of Heaven is near." Turn from the darkness of sin, of a world lined up against God, because God has come into the world. That's the theme of Jesus' preaching, from here on. And so, Jesus uses the term "kingdom of *heaven*" 31 times in Matthew, and 4 more times the term, "the kingdom of *God*." That's what the gospel, the good news about Jesus, is all about: the kingdom, God's reign, his doing his will on earth like it is in heaven. "Jesus is the light of the nations" means everybody needs to turn around, because God's come to meet us in Jesus.

Second, Jesus is the Lord of the Church.

Jesus came to die and rise again to save us from our sins. But he wants to do more than simply make us into Christians with ticket to heaven in hand. He came to make disciples. It isn't that Jesus saw potential in them that made them likely candidates. The point is that *because* his word is our authority, we do what he says. Jesus says, "Follow me," and immediately Peter and Andrew, James and John drop what they're doing and follow him. Jesus calls them to be his disciples, and they drop their nets.

For first-century rabbis, "follow me" meant "Be my disciple." Normally, students would go and ask to be a disciple of a rabbi, like when you apply to college today. But nobody

comes to Jesus by their own initiative. The Lord calls them first. Like in John, when Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. (John 15:16)

Jesus doesn’t just call us to personal salvation, but to ministry with others. When he teaches us, it’s so we’ll teach others. When he heals us, it’s so we can share in healing others. When he washes our feet, he says,

You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. (John 13:13-14)

What makes disciples? Jesus’ word, that calls people to follow.

How can we make disciples? By sharing his word with others.

What should we do when we hear his word? Do what he says.

Like Mary, Jesus’ mother told the servants at Cana, where he did his first miracle: “Do whatever he tells you.” Because he’s not only the Light of the Nations, but he’s the Lord of the church.

Third, Jesus is the Life of the Body.

Verse 18 says, “As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee.” Then, verse 21 says, “Going on from there.” And verse 23 says, “Jesus went throughout Galilee.” He goes around, to where the people are. Instead of ordering people to come to him, he goes out to them in humility and grace. He teaches in their synagogues, that is, honors their established ministries. He goes to the cultural and social centers, and meets the people where they live.

In this gospel, only Jesus ever teaches. But the disciples are ordered to teach those they disciple and baptize, when at the end of this gospel Jesus says, “Go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all I have commanded you” (Matthew 28: 19-20). Now Christian teachers today need to hear this: we’re supposed to teach what Jesus taught the twelve disciples, and only that in terms of what we need to do to be saved. Faithfulness, not creativity is the most important virtue for the teacher. In fact, Jesus says, “Don’t ever let yourselves be called teacher, for you have one teacher” (Matt. 23:8). But it’s a bigger teaching than simply for people in the church who specialize in teaching, for pastors and elders. It’s for *all* of us.

This makes clear what the theme of Jesus’ preaching was. What Jesus preaches here is the good news, the message about the kingdom. Teaching tells you what to do: “turn your lives around!” but preaching gives the motivation, “because here comes the kingdom of heaven!” The two belong together. Because the Law tells us what God expects of us, but it has no power for us to fulfill it. But the Gospel is grace, because it empowers what the Law commands.

That’s why Jesus heals every disease in people. Look how many “alls” in the sentence:

Jesus went around in *all* Galilee

He healed *all* diseases

and *all* maladies

Jesus' fame went out into *all* of Syria

They brought to him *all* who were sick, and he healed them.

This means Jesus isn't just Lord of our will, like when he calls his disciples, but also of our bodies like when he heals our bodies. And when he calls us, like he called Peter, Andrew, James and John, he empowers us to do what he calls us to do. His call isn't based on human standards, and it's not based on any potential he sees in us. It's based on his giving us a new heart, to follow him, to learn from him, to become like him.

It's like when Samuel had to anoint the Lord's choice for king over Israel. He was all impressed with one strong young man named Eliab. But the Lord said,

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7)

I think the movie "Miracle," shows this. It's a true story about Herb Brooks, the coach of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team. When the coaching staff was together on the first day of a week of tryouts, the assistant coach holds the final roster Coach Brooks put together, and he says, "You're kidding me, right?" He adds, "You're missing the best players." But Coach Brooks knows exactly what he wants in a team, and he answers, "I'm not looking for the best players, I'm looking for the right players." He meant to take the right players to face the Soviets, who had completely dominated the sport for 15 years.

"You were born to be hockey players," U.S. coach Herb Brooks told his team before the semifinal game against the former Soviet Union. "You were meant to be here. This moment is yours."

When he gathered at the first practice, the coach asked the players their name, where they were from, and who they played for. The player would answer like, "Rob McClanahan from St. Paul, MN, and I play for the University of Minnesota." I play for Boston University, New Hampshire, whatever. Coach Brooks just watched, and didn't say anything.

One night they had an exhibition game against Norway, and the team tied a mediocre Norway team 3-3. The players just weren't into the game mentally. And Coach Brooks looked at them during the game, and saw his players on the bench weren't watching the game but were checking out the Norwegian girls in the stands.

After the game, the players all get ready to head back to the locker room, when he says "Get back out on the ice." He said, "It was a half-hearted effort, and you looked winded, so we're going to do some conditioning drills." He told them to skate to the blue line and

back, to the center red line and back, and to the far side of the rink and back again. And again, and again, he told the assistant coach to blow the whistle. Pretty soon the players were panting, and then in agony, falling over, heaving, and still he'd say "Again!" "Again!" "Again!"

Finally, team captain goes, "Coach, my name is Mike Eruzione, and I'm from Massachusetts, and I play for the United States of America." And Coach says, "Practice over." It's what he wanted to hear.

See, the coach knew what he was looking for, and he didn't judge like others did. It wasn't just about physical conditioning. It was about becoming a team, about learning who they were playing for.

Let me ask you: Who are you playing the game for? For yourself? To impress someone else? Or to please the master?

Jesus is the life of his body, the church, and our strength isn't based on anything else but his Word and his Spirit, because in him the kingdom is coming, and God is establishing his effective reign on earth, and he wants to do it through you and me.

Jesus' ministry was teaching, preaching, and healing. Teaching shows he wants us to have understanding. Preaching shows he wants us to have commitment. And healing shows he wants us to be whole. That's why he says,

- Turn your life around.
- Trust my word.
- Treat the sick

See, Jesus wants us to be productive spiritually. Like Coach Brooks, he's the one who chose the team, and he told his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you, so that you may bear much fruit."