

Ben and Ralph were out fishing on the lake when a funeral procession passed by. Ben stood up and held his fishing hat over his heart as the hearse passed.

Ralph commented, "Gee, Ben, that was really nice and respectful!"

To which Ben replied, "Well, it's the least I could do. After all, we were married for forty years."

Fred Craddock tells the story about a theology professor and his wife on vacation in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. After ordering breakfast at a local restaurant, they noticed a distinguished-looking, white-haired gentleman moving from table to table, visiting with the guests.

The professor leaned over and whispered to his wife, "I sure hope he doesn't come over here." But he did.

"Where are you folks from?" he asked in a friendly voice.

"Oklahoma," they answered.

"Great to have you here in Tennessee. What do you do for a living?"

"I teach at a seminary."

"Oh, so you teach preachers how to preach. Well, I've got a really great preacher story for you." And with that, the gentleman pulled up a chair and sat down.

Before I tell you his story, though, let me tell you another one. It's found in the gospel according to Luke 5:1-11.

¹Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret [Ga-nes-sa-rett], and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God,

²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.

³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

⁴ When he'd finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we've worked all night long but have caught nothing. [Several other versions put it this way: "We've toiled all night and taken nothing."] Yet if you say so, I'll let down the nets."

⁶ When they'd done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.

⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.

⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they'd taken;

¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you'll be catching people."

¹¹ When they'd brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Prayer

This gospel story starts with a reference to the people coming to Jesus. Goes then to a miracle story. And, ends up being a calling story. Listen again to verse 11:

¹¹ When they'd brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Jesus will direct their lives from then on. And, think of it. When Peter, James and John

decided to follow Jesus, they had no idea that, because they said “Yes,” millions of little boys, and thousands of churches, would someday be named after them.

From this story, we see that Jesus calls ordinary people to discipleship and mission. There’s nothing at all extraordinary about Simon Peter, James and John.

Jesus calls them just as they are. Simon well knows he’s unworthy, but Jesus is not put off by that in the slightest.

Human sin, failure, and inadequacy are no obstacles to Jesus’s call. And, notice Jesus’s call comes at an unexpected time in an unexpected place. Not where we’d normally think to be a holy place, like a church or a synagogue. But, in a fishing boat.

And the same Jesus who invited them to follow him then and there also has invited and continues to invite us to follow him here and now, even in the midst of our ordinary, busy, complicated lives-- and in spite of our frailty, and failures.

And, if you say yes, you have no idea where you’re going to go nor how it’s going to affect your future. Saying yes and meaning it is as if you’ve just signed a blank check and given it to Jesus, with no idea what he’s going to write on it.

But, with the call, comes an assurance. “Don’t be afraid.”

The people of Borneo had a problem. They had a serious problem.

After a malaria outbreak, the World Health Organization, in its infinite wisdom, decided to spray large amounts of pesticide in Borneo to kill the mosquitoes that carried the malaria.

And, it worked. It really did work. The mosquitoes died and the malaria was controlled. But, the pesticide that killed the mosquitos also killed a parasitic wasp that controlled a thatch-eating caterpillar. So, the population of the thatch eating caterpillars exploded and the people of Borneo's roofs began to collapse.

Worse yet, the pesticide also poisoned other insects, which were eaten by the geckoes, which were eaten by the cats. So, the cats were poisoned by the poisoned geckos, and so the cats began to die.

Thus, the rats flourished. And so the people of Borneo started to come down with typhus and the plague because of the rat infestation.

So, to counter that problem, the World Health Organization decided to, I kid you not, they decided to parachute live cats into Borneo to take care of the rat problem.

Can you picture that?

You know, our own stories can often ricochet from one thing to another just like it did for the people of Borneo. As for me, I finished high school in Easley, went to college and received a management degree at Clemson.

From there, I went to seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. I then served churches in Ormond Beach and Orlando, Florida, Charleston, and then Greenville.

And then, after ten years of working full-time on church staffs, I picked up and moved to New York for a degree in a totally unrelated field. After I changed careers. The new career sent me to Houston Texas, to Greenville, to Columbia, to Spartanburg, and then back to Greenville, where I now work for the federal government.

In addition, here I am, standing here this morning, serving as your interim associate pastor. And, in all that richocheting from one place to another happened as I've truly tried to follow Jesus, not perfectly, but the best I could. And, Jesus Christ has been with me all the way.

And, let me underscore this: my following Jesus, and your following Jesus, doesn't apply just to religious employment. I'm no more God called to my duties as your interim associate pastor than I am to my duties for the federal government.

And, in your vocation, whether religious employment, or something else, you're as called to that vocation as I am to being your associate pastor. At least I hope you are.

There've been twists and turns.

I've stumbled. I've fallen.

I've doubted.

I've been scared.

I've been ashamed.

And, like Peter, there've been those times when I've felt as if I've toiled all night. And taken nothing. Have you ever felt like that? I guess we all have.

One time that especially stands out in my mind is when I was a youth minister—many years ago. I had an all night lock in on a Friday night. We had a group of over fifty kids there. And, we had had a wonderful time of sharing and bonding and learning. Two kids who'd never been to our church decided they wanted to follow Jesus. I was on cloud nine.

But, then Sunday came, and one of the crusty deacons literally chewed me out. Why? Because a couple of the kids had thrown their coke cans in the bushes beside the church on Friday night and I'd not picked them up. And, with that, still exhausted from missing an entire night of sleep on Friday, I went back to my office and cried. I felt as if I'd toiled all night and taken nothing. That memory still stings, all these years later.

A pastor friend of mine tells the story of traveling with his family out west several years ago. As they were riding a long stretch of desert highway they came up on a hitchhiker in the hot desert sun. The sign he carried simply read “Anywhere.”

There’s a certain sadness in the sight such as that. A young man, adventuresome, I suppose, going just any ole where. For you see, to be going just any ole where is the same as to be going no where. And, that’s not the life God has planned for any of us.

So, let me ask you: where are you headed this morning? Where are you going? Are you following Christ?

I’ve sat and listened to the stories of most of our Staff and have been amazed at how they followed Jesus to this place of grace. And, I’ve sat and listened to the stories of several of the rest of you of how Jesus lead you here. And, I hope I’ll have the opportunity to hear many more of your stories on how you followed Jesus here.

As I mentioned earlier, Jesus says follow me without telling us where he’s going to lead us. But, when you try and follow Jesus. Watch out. If you’re not careful, you’ll run out of gas trying to do a bunch of good things that aren’t necessarily God things.

I ran across a picture last week of a man, leaned up against a slick short new shiny gas tanker truck. He’s bent over. His face is in his hands. Why?

Because, as I read in the caption, I found out he’d run out of gas. The one who’s supposed to deliver gas has run out of it.

Here's a testimony from my heart to yours. Try to follow Christ, try minister here in this place, or any other, without looking to God for direction and strength and encouragement, and you'll run out of gas while trying to deliver the gas. Mark my word.

I began this sermon by telling you the story of a couple vacationing in Gatlinburg. A seminary Professor and his wife. A man had come up to their table to talk.

“Oh, so you teach preachers how to preach, do you? Well, I've got a really great preacher story for you.”

And with that, the gentleman pulled up a chair and sat down.

Pointing out a window, the man continued. “See that mountain over there? Not far from the base of that mountain an unwed mother gave birth to a son.

At age six, the mother had such a difficult time, she placed the boy in an orphanage.

He had a hard life in his early years because just about every place he went, people asked the same question:

‘Young man, who's your daddy?’

At school, the boy often hid from his fellow students during recess, and almost always sat alone while having lunch. Because ‘the question’ caused so much pain, he avoided going into local shops.

Although he attended church regularly, he always arrived late and stepped out early. When he was about twelve years old, a new minister at his church gave the sermon. The benediction happened so fast that the boy got caught in the aisle and had to walk out with everyone else.

When he reached the exit, the new minister, not knowing anything about the young man, put his hand on his shoulder and asked, ‘Son, who's your daddy?’

By the sheepish looks on the faces of those within earshot, the minister realized his mistake and, using discernment that only the Holy Spirit could provide, quickly recovered. ‘Wait a minute! I see the family resemblance. I know who your Daddy is. You’re a child of God.’

With that he placed his hand on the shoulder of the young man and said, ‘Boy, you’ve got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.’

With that, the boy smiled for the first time in a long time and walked out the door a changed person. He was never the same again. Whenever anybody asked him, ‘Who’s your Daddy?’ he’d just tell them, ‘I’m a Child of God’. And, I’m a follower of Jesus Christ.”

The distinguished gentleman got up from the table and said, “Isn’t that a great story?”

As the man turned to leave, he said, “You know, if that new preacher hadn’t told me that I was one of God’s children, I probably never would have amounted to anything!”

And he walked away. The seminary professor and his wife were stunned. He called the waitress over and asked her, “Do you know who that man was who just left that was sitting at our table?”

The waitress grinned and said, “Well, of course. Everyone here knows him. That’s Ben Hooper. He’s the former governor of Tennessee!”

That’s who you are, too, you know. We remind you of it every week. “You’re a child of God. “You’ve got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.”

One final thought. I’m going to say this and then I am going to sit down.

Let me give you this good word today: As children of God, as followers of Christ, the love of Christ we have to share with others is more contagious than any virus, COVID or otherwise.

So, children of God, followers of Christ, go from this place today and share the love of Jesus Christ with others.

Let your best self shine in a glorious light and others will be inspired by you, and be inspired because of, you.

THIS IS THE GOSPEL.

THIS IS THE GOOD NEWS.

AND, IT'S TRUE.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

AMEN.