

Sermon - The Nets Went Empty and the World Grew Full - Matthew 4:18-23

I.

I've shared with you that Oscar Romero is one of my heroes.

The Encyclopedia Britannica says of him, "...his outspoken defense of the poor-who were powerless victims of widespread violence-brought repeated threats to his life. In the face of those threats, Romero declared his readiness to sacrifice his life for the "redemption and resurrection" of El Salvador."

This is one reason why he is one of my heroes.

He wasn't only an admirer of Jesus, but also a follower of Jesus.

He wrote and spoke beautiful words about Jesus.

His words, "...organize life according to the heart of God" have become the mission statement for my life. (The Violence of Love)

As a writer and a preacher, I admire those words so much.

But what does it mean to follow Jesus and not just admirer of him?

What does it mean to put our feet to the path and follow him?

What does it look like when we put our feet to the task of organizing life according to the heart of God?

These are the questions I'd like for us to ask as we listen carefully to Matthew 4:18-23.

Before we hear that story, please join me in prayer.

(Sing this prayer)

Dear God who made the heart and ear,
we listen care'fly as you draw near,
to hear your words in many ways,
and live your life throughout our days.

(Read Matthew 4:18-23 NRSV)

This week, in a real and meaningful way, I saw what it means to 'immediately leave our nets and follow Jesus,' as Peter and Andrew did in our Scripture passage, to 'immediately leave our boat and our father and follow him,' as James and John did.

I was co-teaching a class in the OLLI program at Furman University.

I was teaching about Christmas in Mali, where Robin and I lived as missionaries from 1997-2000.

I spoke about Jesus, and what he means to my friends in the town and village where we lived.

After I finished talking about Jesus, a man rose from the back of the room and walked slowly and surely to me.

“I heard you say you work at Triune Mercy Center,” he said as he took my hand into his for a firm handshake.

“Yes,” I said with a smile. “That’s right.”

“Do you give out coats to people who need them?” he asked.

“We do,” I answered, “Especially when it’s going to be as cold as it’s predicted to be these next days.”

Then he did a surprising thing, one of those surprising things you see when you belong to the Beloved Community of God.

He took off his own coat.

“Here,” he said, “Please give this coat to someone who might need it.”

I gave it to a young man, chilly and tired, on Thursday afternoon and it brought warmth and encouragement to him.

And this man who gave me his coat to give away at the corner of Rutherford Street and Stone Avenue showed me what it means to organize life according to the heart of God.

He showed me what it means to put my feet to the path and follow Jesus.

II.

As I think about feet, I remember the feet of one of the monks on a 2,300 mile peace walk from Texas to Washington D.C.

Robin, Zeke and I made a pilgrimage to see the monks when they walked through Columbia a few weeks ago.

The monks were resting their feet and eating their lunch at Brookland United Methodist Church before they crossed the Gervais Street Bridge into downtown Columbia.

When they emerged from the church to continue their walk, they were close to me.

I've been writing some stories featuring Saint Francis (who I call Saint Frank) and Brother Juniper in our time and place called "poor little franciscan stories" and I wrote about that moment this way.

Here is my "povera piccola storia francescana."

"Look closely at his feet," said Brother Juniper.

"Listen carefully to them, too," responded Saint Frank.

They'd come to Columbia, the capital city, from Greenville by Greyhound bus.

The monks had come to South Carolina from Texas by foot on a walk for peace.

“His feet are battered and bruised and are wrapped only in a rag that’s tattered and torn,” continued Juniper.

He felt the hurt of the monks feet in his own feet, for that was the way of Juniper.

“I wish that I could give him a new pair of feet, my feet, to help him carry on to Washington, DC.”

Frank was silent for a moment in reverence to Juniper’s kindness and goodness.

“I see what you see, Juniper, but I hear a song from our brother monk.

‘We are good,’ sing his feet.

‘We are healed,’ they sing, ‘Because we are healing.’

Do you hear this song, too, Juniper?”

Juniper knelt to the sidewalk and placed his ear gently on the concrete.

He heard the song.

‘We walk for the good of all living things,’ sang the feet, ‘Especially for the smallest and most forgotten things. We walk to heal a broken world, though it breaks us in our walking.’

Then Juniper heard the quiet voice of the monk.

“Peace and goodness be with you, my friends,” whispered the monk as he gave them a flower.

Then he smiled.

And he hobbled along his way.

Both Juniper and Frank took off their shoes, put them in their backpacks, and walked barefooted back towards the bus station.

Like the humble monk, they knew God a little more closely through their feet.

When we follow Jesus, we know God a little more closely through our feet.

III.

Remember, in our text today we see Peter, Andrew, James and John follow Jesus teaching in the synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing diseases and sicknesses among the people.

This is why following Jesus can mean good news to the world.

I think about another hero of mine, Albert Schweitzer, when I reflect on this.

Before he turned 30 years old, Schweitzer in all of his genius had become a master of music and philosophical/theological thought and was a renowned theologian, pastor, and acclaimed Bach organist.

His life was set for fame, comfort and travel throughout the great cities of the world.

But at age 29, he read of the desperate need for doctors in Gabon in West Africa and decided to shift from his academic/musical life to life of service.

He decided to become a follower of Jesus, and not just an admirer.

There's a story about him in Life Magazine from February of 1965.

By the way, if I hadn't been a missionary, a school teacher, and a pastor here at Triune, I would've loved to have been a writer for Life Magazine.

In this story, at the celebration of his 90th birthday, he says, "But I wish to pay tribute especially to the memory of two men who came from the Catholic mission long ago. They were named Menen and Basil. I saved the life of the wife of one of them who was very ill, and the other came out of kindness. These two men took me down to the river and said to me, "You have to build a hospital here, but you must not build it up into the heavens; you must put it down on the earth."

Then he continues, "Oh, well, I have written many books on religion. But after all I came here to put religion into practice. Christianity will only propagate when put into practice. Christianity is practiced here for all to see."

This is why we must be followers of Jesus and not just admirers of him.

This is why we must put our feet to the path and follow him.

This is why we must put our feet to the task of organizing life according to the heart of God.

The world has need of us.

In his great literary work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Schweitzer wrote “He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside,

He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”

Jesus comes to us now with the words he spoke to Peter, Andrew, James, John, Oscar, my OLLI friend, and Albert.

“Follow me.”

IV.

A 5-year-old child was detained by ICE agents in Minneapolis and sent to a detention center in Texas. Let’s go there and look into the eyes of those detaining him and say, “This is a child of God who is welcome in this place.”

Let’s follow Jesus.

We live in a county where 1 in 5 renters are at risk of eviction and where last year 15,000 evictions were recorded. Let's work to keep people housed by creating a Greenville Housing Court by 2026.

Let's follow Jesus.

Thousands of children in our county lack reliable access to mental health services and they're experiencing mental health crises. Let's work to find creative, compassionate ways to help them.

Let's follow Jesus.

V.

Beloved Community, may we know God through our feet.

Here is a poem I wrote about feet.

I
have
tough feet,
like old stones
on hard, rocky ground.
They have walked miles of migrant roads,
from sun rise to sun set, dark to dark, everywhere.
They are part of the earth itself.

My heart is the sky,
bright and blue,
hoping
for
home.

Go now with a soft heart and tough feet to organize life according to the heart of God.