

“FOLLOW ME”
Matthew 4:12-23
Epiphany 3 A
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We all like to be chosen. It makes our day when someone says they want us.

I have a vivid memory from my childhood that I want to forget. I must have been about six or seven years old. The kids from the neighborhood used to gather in an empty lot next to our house to play softball. Part of the routine included choosing teams. I used to hate this ritual, standing there while the big kids on the block picked their teams, afraid that I was going to be the last one picked. It happened too often. Often no one wanted me because I was not very good. I was determined that I would not be the last one left standing. I worked hard and practiced and practiced. It worked. After a few years my skills had so increased that I was one of the first ones picked.

It does not change as we get older. There are surely many here this morning who have gone through a job interview for a position that you really wanted. You worked hard for this opportunity. You carefully edited your resume. You rehearsed your interview technique. You wanted them to choose you. It was exhilarating when they did. It was devastating when they did not.

It has become increasingly popular to portray Jesus as the consummate leader and the ultimate coach. He knew how to get things done. He knew how to lead an organization. Like a successful coach and dynamic leader, Jesus did not just accept anyone on his team. He did not just want names on a roster or entries on church membership directory. He wanted disciples, players who could contribute to the success of his team. If you really wanted to be His disciple, you have got to be willing to work at it. You must be committed. You must pray, worship, study the Bible, serve in the church and develop your skills. You must show that you are worthy of a place on the team.

However, a careful look at the New Testament and today's Gospel reveals something very different.

Jesus never accepted volunteers. There were no tryouts. There was no “disciple combine” at the dome in Jerusalem. They were no stop watches and tape measures to calculate your competence. No one timed your 40 yard dash or measured your vertical leap. None of this mattered to Jesus. He chose his disciples without regard for their qualifications. He chose you just because he wanted you on his team. In fact, the only qualification seemed to be that you were not qualified. Jesus often picked from the bottom of the barrel, unsophisticated, rough-on-the-edges sorts of folk, like the

uneducated working class fishermen in today's Gospel. Other times it even included people of suspect moral character, like tax collectors and women of tainted reputation. Jesus recruits folk with blisters on their hands, dirt under their fingernails and skeletons in the closet. These were people with holes in their hearts convinced that no one of any importance would ever choose them.

This is no way to put together a winning team. In a world where leaders are always looking for the best and the brightest, Jesus seems like a fool.

Jesus' invitation must have come as a shock. Here was a sensationally popular rabbi and a man of God who wanted them on his team. When Jesus said to them, "Follow me!" it was stunning affirmation, a unexpected compliment, an incredible announcement of good news. Not only the world but even God had repeatedly called the value of their lives into question. Now Jesus in defiance of both dares to value them . . . unconditionally!

No wonder Jesus ended up on a cross, dead and defunct! But God was determined to get His way with the world and its fishermen. Willing to have dirt on his face and a tainted reputation, "On the third day" God raised Jesus from the dead and continued to turn this world up-side-down and inside-out.

That same blessed fate God offers to us. When we are left off the team, when we are embarrassed and want to hide in the back of the room, when we are ashamed of our lives and what we have done to others, when we question what we are doing with our lives and feel that we are going nowhere, Jesus comes to seek us out. He takes the initiative. Even though we are sure that no one would ever bother with us, Jesus wants us on his team. He says even to us bumbling, stumbling fishermen, "Follow me."

When we feel odd and out of place, like the ugly duckling that everyone wants to ignore, Jesus says, "Come to my table and eat and drink. I have reserved for you the place of honor at my table."

When we are so ashamed that we want to run and hide convinced that no one would ever want us, Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven, all of them."

How can we refuse an offer like that? How could we not follow him? Remaining at the sea shore tending our nets eking out an existence in the "same old same old" is no longer an option. Following Jesus, re-born by His good word and daring to live differently, we do odd things like gathering on Sunday mornings to show our dirty underwear, trotting out for all to see our sins and misdeeds. The followers of Jesus do not need to hide the truth and pretend to be what we are not. We can afford to come clean about our sins because we know that here no sin big enough to get us kicked off the team.

In the midst of crowded schedules we still find enough to time to listen to wounded friend, to run an errand for a crippled stranger, to wipe away the tears of a grieving neighbor, and to share the faith with our bewildered children.

In a world obsessed with “What’s in it for me?” where everyone is pressured to do only what is expedient, convenient and popular, we follow Jesus freely, fearlessly and dare to go “against the grain.” We do what is right, true and just, regardless of the cost.

On that day at the seashore those fishermen left behind their old way of life. They became part of a movement and spread a message that turned the world up-side down and inside out. Jesus called them. They followed Him. So can we!