

COMPELLED BY LOVE
Sermon for Epiphany 3A—Mt 4:12-23
LPC, 1/22/17

This is the second in this year's series of Epiphany sermons. As you may recall from last week, I said that Epiphany is all about meeting Jesus and knowing him to be the Son of God. The Wise Men came to the manger to meet Jesus, and knew him to be the Son of God by direct heavenly revelation – through the stars. John the Baptist met Jesus and knew him to be the Son of God by direct heavenly revelation: the descent of the Holy Spirit like a dove and a voice from heaven. That was Matthew's version.

Last week we heard John's version of the same event, and once again John the Baptist met Jesus and knew him to be the Son of God by direct heavenly revelation through the dove and the heavenly voice. But as I said, John introduced to a new way of meeting Jesus and knowing him to be the Son of God – through the testimony and actions of other people. According to the Gospel of John, the first two disciples were introduced to Jesus by John the Baptist, and then one of those two introduced his brother Simon Peter to Jesus. That was John's version of how Jesus' first disciples came to him.

Today we are back in the Gospel of Matthew, and Matthew's version of the first disciples is a little different from John's. Instead of being introduced to Jesus by John the Baptist, Jesus calls his first disciples personally. He beckons them to leave their work as fishermen and "Follow me."

I advise not worrying overmuch about this discrepancy between the Gospels. On the other hand I also advise not trying too hard to harmonize them. The question for when Bible accounts differ is not, "Which is correct?" or even, "How can we make them agree?" but: what is the Gospel truth in each account?

I suggested last week that the truth, or at least one of the truths, in John's version of the first disciples is that Jesus may be met and known to be the Son of God through other people. Therefore, other people, through the grace of God, may meet Jesus and know him to be the Son of God through us

During this Epiphany season, when we are looking at how Jesus is met and known to be the Son of God, the Gospel truth in Matthew's version of the first disciples, is that Jesus is met and known to be the Son of God through discipleship. Jesus is met and known by people who follow Jesus, in the act of following Jesus.

There are three aspects of Gospel truth about discipleship expressed in this story from Matthew that I'd like to draw your attention to today.

The first has to do with the form of Jesus' invitation to the disciples: "Follow me." This word translated "follow" does not just mean to fall in line behind or copy, as in a child's game of "Follow the leader." The Greek word is real disciples' word. It implies some kind of investment. According to my sources, to follow in this sense means commitment, and cost.

You know, when you pay money to participate in something, like tuition, or an admission fee, you are not just paying the costs of whatever program you are joining. You are putting up earnest money, in a way. You are expressing, in a tangible way, your commitment to the program. Having invested something in the program, you are more likely to stick with it than if it had cost you nothing.

Following Jesus is the same kind of thing. Unless you invest something that means something to you, you may not feel you have a sufficient stake to keep going when the going gets rough. So, if you really want to meet Jesus, if you really want to call yourself a follower of Jesus, if be prepared to invest something that means something to you.

The second Gospel truth about discipleship from this section of Matthew is that discipleship is a step into the unknown. Jesus calls Simon and Andrew and James and John away from everything they've ever known, and they "immediately" respond, without putting their affairs in order, without farewells or closure ceremonies, without job descriptions or letters of agreement. The disciples really have no clear idea of what they are getting themselves into. How could they do this?

I invite you to think about commitments of a similarly serious nature to discipleship, like marriage, or parenthood. When couples decide to get married, they are usually compelled by love, and they typically have only a partial notion of what marriage is going to be. Eventually there comes a time in a marriage when one or both partners think, "I never expected this." "I never expected I would have to deal with moods like this." "I never expected we would struggle so much." "I never expected to have to watch my spouse suffer.

Having a baby is likewise. There are no guarantees and there's no way you are prepared for everything you'll have to face. Intellectually we all know that getting married or having a child or taking on a new vocation means we will probably face things we never expected, and that some of them might be really, really hard.

What if someone read us a list of disclaimers about getting married or having a baby like you hear on all those drug commercials of every conceivable side effect? Possible side effects include disappointment, annoyance, heartache, worry, grief..." Few of us would forgo marriage or parenthood just because of the terrible things that might happen when we put our hearts on the line. Most of us undertake marriage or parenthood despite the risks because we are compelled by love. And compelled by love, we jump in knowing that we are literally risking all. Discipleship is like that. Discipleship is compelled by love.

The third Gospel truth for today is this. Notice, here in Matthew's version of the first disciples, that Jesus initiates the relationship. The disciples don't go off in search of someone to follow. Jesus makes the first move. And so it is with discipleship. In Jesus' life and death, God has made the first move. Jesus is the first one to extend a hand in compelling love. Jesus has already risked all for the sake or relationship with us. We don't have to worry about investing ourselves, in spending our love, and not being requited.

The invitation is out there.