

COME, FOLLOW ME

Sermon for January 25, 2009

Rev. Dr. Franklin E. Vilas

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea-- for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Mark 1:16-18

As we move further into the 21st century-- January of 2009 is almost gone!-- I find myself in an increasingly reflective mood as I approach the task of preaching. I have, after all, been preaching sermons for nearly sixty years-- if you include the attempts made in high school chapel services in the 1950s to express an unformed faith.

I know that some of those sermons have been pretty good-- I even find myself inspired today by rereading them. And some of them were awful! I know that the best ones-- those that seemed to make the most impression on people-- were those preached out of my own experience. They have about them the ring of authenticity-- much more than all the attempts simply to bring intellectual understanding to the text.

For ultimately, living religion must emerge from our personal and collective experience, from our own life journeys, our own stories. All the theological treatises of history are reflections on someone else's experience. God truly speaks to us only through our own.

I like as far as possible to preach sermons speaking primarily from experience-- not that I think my own personal journey is so important-- but precisely because it is *my* experience. That, after all, is all that I really know. Today the subject is conversion.

The story in the Gospel of Mark today is that of the call of the first disciples, of Simon Peter and Andrew, fishermen of the Sea of Galilee. As we read this familiar story of the encounter on the shore, we do so from our own cultural perspective. I am sure that many of us have the picture of simple, poor peasants living by the lake, enjoying a life of relative freedom that allowed them to drop everything to follow this itinerant preacher. Our sequence hymn today describes them as "happy, simple fisher folk". I am afraid

they have been falsely typecast.

As a matter of fact, recent archeological finds by the Sea of Galilee indicate that the fishing industry was one of the more developed and lucrative businesses of the time-- and that, far from being simple peasants, Peter, Andrew, James and John were successful merchants. Peter was wealthy enough to have a home that could accommodate his extended family, including his mother-in-law. Zebedee owned his own fishing fleet, which would have become the property of his sons.

When the encounter with Jesus took place, it was truly for them life-changing. To leave their fishing fleet and equipment and to set out on the road to discipleship was indeed a vocational turnaround and a major life decision. There was in this young man Jesus an attractive power so great that it touched depths of their being, and called them into new dimensions of living, great enough to cause them to walk away from all that they knew. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people".

From my own life, I can understand something of what those early disciples experienced. I was brought up in an extended family who were solid and successful members of society. My parents were Christian people and faithful members of the Church, but with their forebears they believed in emotional distance and in striving for perfection and achievement in the eyes of the world. As a result, in elementary school as a child and then in boarding school and college I strove to excel at everything to win their approval-- studies, athletics, extra-curricular activities and student leadership.

I succeeded in all of these areas, but I found myself cut off emotionally from other people and from my own inner being. Meeting the expectations of others can result in losing yourself. By the time I arrived at Yale University I found myself burnt out from competing, and in a deep depression that enveloped me like a black cloud. It rose straight from the depths of my unconscious, and it reduced me to an anxiety-ridden, suicidal state.

Only those who have been touched by such an experience can really know what I am talking about. It is not a situation that I would wish on anyone. I awoke in despair and living every day seemed like an immense burden. Only a sheer act of will allowed me to study and carry on. The universe seemed empty and bleak. My childhood God seemed to have abandoned me.

It was in that situation, which lasted for a year, that I heard the promise of the Gospel of Christ preached in a new and powerful way by the Rev. Samuel Shoemaker, one of the

Episcopal Church's great evangelists. His words reached through the darkness and touched me in the depths of my being. As a result, I acted totally out of character and went to have a private session with him. Sam spoke to me of the reality of God, and of his love for me expressed in his Son, Jesus Christ. In the course of our conversation, he turned to look at me. It is hard to describe my response to his steady gaze. I suddenly felt streaming from his eyes a power that seemed to come from beyond him. It seemed to be more than human, and penetrated my consciousness in such a way that I could understand the response of Simon and Andrew.

Sam asked me if I had ever really accepted the invitation of Christ to follow him as my personal savior, and there on my knees in that room at Yale I did just that. I asked God to come into my life and touch the darkness. I prayed for strength not only to go on living, but to become a follower. I walked out of that session with Sam Shoemaker a changed person. I was eighteen years old.

Within the space of several weeks I had been healed of my depression. I moved from the depths of suicidal despair to the knowledge and awareness that I was surrounded by the love of God, and that the living power of the spirit could actually touch and heal a wounded soul. This was not a surface emotional experience, but a deep cleansing of my emotional and personal life. I felt as if I were emerging from prison, free for the first time to truly be myself.

I realized that all my striving to be perfect and successful might please others, but it had nothing to do with God's love for me. I had known about Christ, but this experience of being met by him had a profound impact on me. It actually saved my life. God had reached out and invited me to a new and exciting adventure. My life direction changed at that point, and a road opened that led me into the ordained ministry.

This brought disappointment to those who had other plans for my future. A maternal uncle pled with me not to throw my life away in such a useless occupation as the ministry. He promised leadership and success in his family business, MacMillan Publishing Company, if I would only reconsider my decision. But Sam Shoemaker's call to the service of others in the name of Christ had reached me-- and the light that had penetrated my own darkness was too real to ignore. The sense of the presence and power of God and His Christ which I came to know in those days has never left me, in all the ups and downs that life has brought since.

My experience of conversion was, I suppose, dramatic. But in the state I was in I needed something that powerful to break through and dispel the clouds of reactive depression. For

most of us, thankfully, such drama is not necessary. The presence and call of God can be known in gentle ways as well. Each of us in our life stories has times when a knock on the door has come. It might have been through a dream, or through a relationship -- through the birth of a child, an unusual sunset or a beautiful piece of music.

If we take time to be silent and reflect on our lives we will remember such times, such places, where we heard the voice of the Master speaking to us. And now, if we listen still, we may hear the call in the silence to each of us in our own place and time, "Come, follow me."

For each of us, that call may mean something different. Not all of us are called to drop everything and embark on a new vocation. But the call is always to a deeper insight, a deeper vision, a better way of living. Peter, Andrew, James and John were called to "fish for people", to use their natural skills as fishermen to draw other human beings to the Gospel, and to build the body of Christ in the world.

We are called in this 21st century to tasks appropriate to our time. The age old message of human transformation remains as fresh as in when it was first spoken by Jesus to the fishermen. For us as Christians and Americans, however, it carries with it a new call to a global community. We are called anew to love the Creation we have been given as a gift from God, and to change our lifestyles of consumerism and abuse of the environment. We are called to lessen the gap between the rich and the poor, to heal the diseases of the human race that lead to the death of so many children, to spread the gifts of justice and peace to a weary world.

Yet our own lives are each unique, and the way we respond to that call of the Christ will depend on our own circumstances and our own lives. Nevertheless, my experience is that it is utterly real. He comes to us as he did to those fishermen by the shore of Lake Galilee so long ago-- he fixes us with his healing and challenging gaze. And he calls us each in our own way to come---- and follow him.