

The Calling of the Disciples (Columbia Heights)

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[0:00] It was Richard and my engagement party. Now some of you were likely there. Even though we invited about 75 people, well over that number showed up, and that's when I realized the table community seemed to be strong believers in open invitations.

Now I found myself choking up that night, overjoyed. Not just because I was happy that Richard and I were going to get married, though at the time I still was fairly certain he would realize the mistake he made in Canada before the wedding.

But because something extraordinary was happening in that moment. I was celebrating this momentous occasion with my church family. Something that I never thought would be possible. See, the table church has been an important community to me. A family that I thought I would never have. And as I was reflecting recently about the return to community in person, and what it meant, I couldn't help but reflect on that moment, that engagement party back in 2017.

It's also a reminder of why I've stayed here so long. So why do I share this moment with you when we're walking through the book of Mark?

[1:15] First, Richard has shared with me that the table church community actually responds more vocally when Richard and I are both in a picture that he posts on Instagram. There's more likes, more comments, more engagement.

So I'm hoping that that will transfer to here as well. Which brings me to a second side request. Please start liking, commenting aggressively on other things Richard posts because I don't like taking pictures.

And that was good. I mean, it's good. Second, and probably more relevant to this sermon, this moment was a reminder that God's story, the story we are invited to join, is fundamentally radical. It contradicts humanity's narrative of self, where selfish focus is encouraged, where worth is earned, and where identity is found in fleeting endeavors.

Like some of you listening, I grew up learning both explicitly and implicitly that I needed to be a certain way in order for God to want to call me into God's story.

[2:17] Those elevated were made to look flawless, and even redemption stories seem to have a tinge of complete healing. Never a work in progress.

I internalized that if I wasn't able to be a model Christian, that God would not have use for me in God's story. And model Christian was defined in very particular ways.

Model Christians went to church every Sunday, and also showed up Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, prayed every day, read their Bible, hide, showed up, did not have sex before marriage, and most importantly, were absolutely not gay.

In fact, when I finally realized that I was gay, that I was no longer going to be able to be that model Christian I had strived so hard to be, probably the biggest argument in that moment with God was actually that I'd never be able to be in ministry.

I told God, and I really was not, I was like, listen, I've followed all the rules, I've been a good Christian, I was willing to go into ministry, but I contended that if I was gay, if this was what God made me, then I couldn't be part of God's story.

[3:31] Many years later, standing before you, serving in ministry for, I think a little over a decade now, I can tell you God won that argument. More importantly, when I reflect on that moment, I realize how warped my view of God's narrative was, how warped my view of the gospel, the good news that we are called into was.

And as I look back on that moment, and this was one of those moments, you know, I always say, I don't have those pretty Netflix special moments of coming to realization where it's like cute crying, I'm like snotty, and gross, and angry, and like no one wants to be near me.

It was one of those moments. But it was that moment, and looking back on it, that I realized that God wasn't trying to exclude me, but instead was trying to invite me and my full self into God's story.

The story that God had been sharing with me all along. And it seems like when we feel at our lowest, when we feel down for God, that's when God can actually work with us most, because that's when we're most willing to challenge our own conceptions, and our own constructions of who God is, and how God is working in our lives.

So I want to take a moment to read the passage for today. We're focused, we're still in that first chapter of Mark, 14 through 20. This part is sometimes called the calling of the first disciples.

[4 : 52] And in this passage, we see Jesus' actions teach us so much about what the story of God is actually calling us to. So let me read. And if you want to follow along, you can open up Mark 1, 14 through 20, or just follow along on the screens.

And it says, Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent and believe in the gospel. And as he walked by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew, his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen.

Then Jesus said to them, Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men. They immediately left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther from there, he saw James, the son of Zebedee, and John, his brother, who also were in the boat, mending their nets.

And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and went after him. So I want to take a moment to remind us about the context in which we are receiving this writing.

[6 : 01] Why? Well, I think it's better to demonstrate. So on the screen is a text message between me and my husband. I may have used this once before, and I've preserved this text message for a very long time.

It's a screenshot of my phone, because I love it so much. So I am, of course, the blue, and he is the gray. Those of you not fluent emojis, I say I love you, and he replies, yeah, sad face.

So why do I share this with you? One, because everyone knows the other Richard's the favorite.

But two, because context is important. And when you understand the context of a conversation, which you can see better on the second slide, the message makes more sense.

So just like we need context for a full conversation in text messages, we also need context in the messages we're trying to receive in the books that we're reading in the Bible.

Now, several scholars have spent far more time thinking about Mark and his context than we will have time to dive into now. If you are a nerd or just interested in that, let me know. There's lots of books.

[7 : 10] But some important context just up front is to remember that Mark's book is often considered one of the earliest, before Matthew, Luke, and John. It's written somewhere in the decades following Jesus' life.

And Mark is wrestling with his readers to place in words the important acts of Jesus and his ministry on earth that should be guiding our own lived-out faith.

Mark's goal is to remind his readers of the narrative Jesus gave to the world through his ministry. In terms of style, Mark is described by one commentator as popular rather than published and literary, pointing to the Greek he uses as more casual, more common, and as more narrative and action-oriented.

Mark is calling his readers, likely already familiar with the story of Jesus, into action. So it seems appropriate that early on we see the calling of four disciples who immediately drop their nets and follow Jesus.

And it seems important that those who were first called were by all means ordinary, common, unknown themselves. As I mentioned earlier, the story we were invited to join is fundamentally radical.

[8 : 21] It contradicts humanity's narrative of self and God. So let's dive into that together. First, God's purpose is clear.

To call us and others into God's story. Mark 1.14 tells us that after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near.

Repent and believe in the good news. This is an unambiguous statement of God's purpose. Jesus came to Galilee to proclaim the good news of God and call people to believe.

This narrative is not new, of course. God has been calling us to participate in God's story from the beginning of Genesis. Throughout the Old Testament, we see humanity fail as God seeks to include us in the broader narrative.

This framing is important, though, because it contextualizes the rest of the passage. It provides the why for Jesus' next actions. Namely, calling the disciples.

[9 : 24] See, we are told that Jesus came to Galilee with the purpose of proclaiming the good news of God and to call people to believe. And in the passage at hand, we see that the first action Jesus takes in facilitating this purpose is to call two sets of individuals as disciples.

Simon and his brother Andrew were fishermen casting a net, and James and John, also brothers, who were fishermen apparently working for their father. As we talked about earlier, context matters. This is Jesus, God incarnate, who is calling as his first disciples fishermen, who according to the religious standards of the day, were not ceremonial clean.

And in a society where many of you may be familiar with this, but if not, longer conversation, all we try to have over coffee, but the fundamental piece we need to understand to understand how important this is, is that being clean was extremely important in Jesus' day.

It is quite literally determinative of who had access to God and who didn't. It determined who was permitted to participate in the religious life of the Jewish community and who was not.

[10 : 29] So Jesus choosing as his disciples, as those who would follow him, be part of his ministry on earth, and continue the message God was sending through Jesus to the world after he left this earth.

It was radical for Jesus to choose individuals that their society would not. And it would be still radical today. Instead of looking at the theological schools or the wealthy or the people in position of authority, Jesus looked to the everyday person.

The person society wouldn't give a second glance. And this is the person that became a central figure in God's story. As Pastor Anthony talked about last week, what we see in the Gospels and particularly in Mark reverberates throughout the Old Testament, Jesus' life was a perfect living out of the narrative that had been going on for centuries between God and humanity.

So it should come as no surprise that God has often called people into a story that society would have deemed unworthy. See David, a shepherd boy, to be the next king.

Joseph, the youngest son, to be the deliverer of Israel through famine. Esther, the orphan daughter of Jews in exile to prevent the extermination of her people. Moses, who by all accounts had stage fright, acts as the mouthpiece of God to the Egyptians.

[11 : 51] And Jael, a Jewish woman who single-handedly took down the general of the Canaan army. Countless examples are given to us of average people raised up to do extraordinary things in God's narrative.

And what we see from all of this is important. That God sees worth in everyone. This is a central piece of the Gospel message.

The good news is that Jesus is so adamant to be preached. Now while religious leaders, frankly before Jesus, contemporary to Jesus, and even now, seem to consistently attempt to limit access to God and to make red lines of who's in and who's out, Jesus does the exact opposite.

God is calling those who are unclean, unseen, and likely unlearned to be the disciples. God is showing through Jesus and through Jesus' action that the worth that each of us has is immutable and unearned.

And equally important is that the disciples followed immediately. The disciples were by every account imperfect. They didn't always understand Jesus. They showed pettiness at times.

[13 : 11] They failed to obey. They made mistakes. They demonstrated unrighteous anger. But their imperfection did not preclude them from being part of God's narrative.

I'll say that again. I feel like this is an often happy conversation. Their imperfection did not preclude them from being part of God's narrative.

Amen. Likely, a narrative that will show up through Mark as we discuss it further is this idea of process, right?

We're not meant to glamorize the one-touch miracle, the one moment and we're done. But instead, we are called to embrace the journey, stumble along the way. As we explore Mark, we will see that

time after time the disciples fail and time after time the disciples learn and grow and then fail again. Sometimes in the exact same way. Sometimes differently. And we're privileged to see their journey of becoming. See, where I learned as a young person that God needed me to be perfect in order to be part of the story, in Mark, we are reminded that God wants us now as we are with works in progress.

[14:28] Part of discipleship, part of following Jesus, is the continued growth and transformation. C.S. Lewis wrote in one of his books, *The Screwtape Letters*, perhaps one of those beautiful images of how God loves us.

He writes, Remember always that God really likes the little merman, which is referring to us if you've read the story you understand why, and sets an absurd value on the distinctiveness of every one of them.

When he talks of losing their selves, he only means abandoning the clamor of self-worth. Once they have done that, he really gives them back all their personality, and those, I am afraid, sincerely, that when they are wholly his, they will be more themselves than ever.

See, worth has always been there, and we are called into a story that wants us to live into our whole selves. Now, the last part of the passage I want to focus on is the part where Mark writes Jesus' words, and I will make you to become fishers of men.

Now, I want to focus on a particular Greek word in there, again, it's *thai*, right, which is a word that basically is to cause to be, but it's in this odd tense that English doesn't have called the middle voice.

[15:49] Again, another conversation if you're nerdy or interested that I'm glad to have, but really, I think what we want to understand about this tense is it tends to imply that the actor, whoever's doing the verb, is also the medium, the thing being effective.

So there's an implication here of this growth, this process, even in the word choice here. See, we're not being called to a new job, right? This isn't Jesus offering a new job to these four individuals.

This is a new life, a new identity, because God is not calling us to a new career or another checklist or another activity or another resume. God is calling us to a new identity.

Reverend Dr. Norma Everest once put it this way in looking at this text. She said these details, specifically this one, that seemed little when we first read the passage, are not little at all.

Mark put them in here to talk about what following Jesus really means, how steep the climb to authentic discipleship actually is, and how real the costs are. Mark is telling us in all sorts of ways that Jesus is not inviting the first disciples into a task, follow me and I will make you fish for people, but a new identity, follow me and I will make you become fishers for people.

[17:05] See, Mark is reminding the reader of something that is core to the gospel, the discipleship, that following Jesus is a process, a becoming and growing that occurs over time.

It is not a one-time prayer, it's not a checklist to be completed, it's not even a linear path. It is at times messy, ambiguous, unclear.

There are moments we get it wrong and have to course-correct. It asks us to leave what we know, maybe what makes us feel safe, and invites us into a better story.

That is the promise of the gospel that Jesus is so eager to preach. So we talked about three major themes.

The first is that God's purpose is clear to call us and others into God's story. A story that is fundamentally radical, fundamentally different than the societal narrative many of us have grown up with.

[18:04] A story that is ever expansive and inclusive and based in love and belonging. A story that is counter to society's effort to limit. And as we understand more about the story we're being called into, we understand we're being called in that story because God sees worth in everyone.

A worth that is unchangeable, that is not earned, and cannot be purchased, cannot be lost, or even given away. It is an immutable part of our existence as a reflection of the image of God.

And that worth exists now, not in the future. And because God sees worth in everyone, God is calling us into a new identity.

The discipleship that the following of Jesus is not a one-time action, but instead a way of existing that is centered on the gospel message and living out that in the ways that we can reflect that to each other.

So why does this even matter? Why have we been listening? Frankly, I always hesitate to try and tell you what you're supposed to get out of a sermon. In fact, some of my favorite conversations I've ever had with people are the ones where someone is deeply touched by a sermon I gave, explains what they got from it and how it impacted their life, and in my mind I'm sitting here thinking, like, that was absolutely not the point.

[19 : 24] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So the reality is God speaks to us where we are and in our moment. And yet, I also feel compelled to at least ask us to challenge ourselves.

because part of this community is that we are meant to push each other to live out authentic lives committed to the gospel. So it's important to think about how you might challenge yourself this week to step into God's narrative more fully.

That is going to look different for everyone. You know, at the beginning I shared a reflection about Richard and my engagement and about that being a moment for me where I finally saw that I did have a place in God's narrative.

Maybe for you right now you're not convinced that there is even a space in God's narrative for you. Maybe part of that hesitancy is that you are unconvinced of your inherent work.

You can't see what God has seen all along. That you worry that God is just not big enough for what you're bringing to the table. Your challenge this week might be just to open up and listen for the ways God is calling you into that narrative.

[20 : 31] To sit in the full meaning of the gospel and your part in it and God's desire for you to be present within it. Now if you want to talk about that I say this a lot but I'm always open to grab coffee or tea or hot chocolate and if you want to pray about that may I am sure we'd be glad to have time to pray with you and for you as many others would.

Now for others we may not be fully accepting that we are called into God's narrative that we have purpose in living out the gospel. We may not feel like we're ready to be part of God's narrative that we still have work to do or maybe we're too busy or don't have the right skills to offer.

Now honestly during COVID I've actually spent a lot of time reflecting like tangent but you've gotten much fewer than normal from me so we'll go with it.

One of the things about COVID time for me actually has really been this reflection on the gospel and in some ways what we've been told to do during COVID to protect our own health has been sort of an antithesis to what I understand living out the gospel to look like.

Right? It's seclude yourself from others don't interact with strangers find small homogenous bubbles to spend your time with so that you don't spread this thing. And that's been so important and continues to be something that we want to be thoughtful about.

[22 : 00] But at the same time as we open up I actually now find myself as an inherent introvert who has kind of enjoyed not interacting with a bunch of people all the time and being honest and vulnerable that it's almost hard for me to get back into those practices that I found so fulfilling and so important and the things that I really thought about what does it look like to live out the gospel.

And so I say all that to say right now honestly your part of the story may be as simple as saying hello to a new person making someone feel welcome ensuring that the table family that has supported and loved Richard and me continues to make room for our family as it grows.

Honestly this is particularly important now because a lot of people have felt alone have felt disconnected have not seen what love and action looks like in a really long time.

and so it may just be the simplest way to start really practicing being part of that narrative is to practice hospitality and curiosity with others.

But your challenge this week may be as simple as saying hello to someone you haven't met yet. I know, I'm terrified. but whatever you do I pray that each of you take a step into God's narrative that you push yourself towards who God is calling you to be because just as these four disciples dropped what they were doing and followed immediately exactly as they were God also calls each of us to do the same.

[23 : 38] Our journey with God starts immediately exactly where we are. We'll be right back.