

“Follow First. Ask Questions Later”  
Matthew 4:12-23  
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I shall begin by shamelessly trying to evoke your sympathy for me by telling you that there was a standing, if unwritten, rule in my childhood home that should something be amiss, the plan of action was this: “Blame Stacey First, Ask Questions Later.” If all the Twinkies were missing from their appropriate resting place, “Blame Stacey first, ask questions later.” If the dog escaped from his rope and went around terrorizing the neighborhood, “Blame Stacey first, ask questions later.” And should little brother shed, in the presence of mother, what all the children knew to be crocodile tears, well then of course, you guessed it, “Blame Stacey first, ask questions later.” And I am quite sure that had I been on the boat with James and John, no matter that it was Christ himself who called them away, their mother would have done what is always done when I’m around: “Blame Stacey first, ask questions later.”

OK, so maybe I am laying it on a little thick here, but it is frequently true that we sometimes tend to rush to judgment before all the facts are in. We sometimes make up our minds about things before we have thoroughly investigated all the details. Sometimes we call this rash or impulsive behavior. Sometimes we call it narrow-mindedness. But whatever we call it today, it doesn’t seem to have been a problem for the evangelist Matthew because his motto is

simple and clear: “Follow first. Ask questions later.” It is a feature of the Kingdom Matthew seems to want to emphasize, whether it is in the calling of the twelve disciples, the crowds who follow Jesus seeking healing without the faintest idea how it works, or the wannabe disciples who ultimately decide not to follow Jesus because the questions they ask before they follow get them answers that make following impossible.

We are very familiar with the story of how the disciples exchanged their nets of rope for nets of love when Jesus tells them that he will make them fishers of men. The story exhibits the familiar themes of call and response, faith and discipleship, the nearness of the Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus. It is a story used to encourage evangelism and Christian vocation, a story that shows that even humble fishermen can be great leaders in the church. It is a testament to blind faith, to leaving behind family and professional obligations to follow the Messiah. But please do not misunderstand me as I extol the virtues of blind faith. I am certainly not speaking about an anti-intellectual approach to faith, nor an unquestioning loyalty to a charismatic leader. What I am talking about here is the invitation Christ offers not to ignorance, but to inquiry. You see, very few of us will come to profess Christ because we have studied long and hard enough, read enough books and written enough papers. But few of us believers will grow in faith without continuing the journey through some form of inquiry and questioning. So perhaps I should amend my interpretation of Matthew’s take on discipleship to say,

“Follow First, but make sure to ask questions later.” For surely, that is what the disciples did throughout the gospels as they sat at the feet of their master.

And therefore let us accept blindly that this story is about radical discipleship and the need to follow Christ unreservedly. But let us then ask questions of the story which will deepen our faith and help us to understand how to better be disciples who follow. And it is in some of the nooks and crannies of the text that we find some very interesting things. First of all, there is an interesting twist in the original Greek text regarding the nets used for fishing. There are two different Greek words used for the nets used by these fishing families. Peter and Andrew are using a net which is used for fishing from the bank or the shore, a round “casting net,” which presumably one throws out into the water and draws back in by means of a rope. The sons of Zebedee, on the other hand, are using a much larger net used to fish from a boat, and perhaps needing to be operated by more than one person. Now it crossed my mind to wonder why, if Matthew’s object lesson is simply about blind faith turning fishermen into fishers of men and women, why then does he go into such a level of detail as to differentiate between two types of nets, and therefore, we might imagine, two different types of fishermen? Although we certainly can’t know for sure, perhaps with a little help from the Gospel of Mark, from which Matthew took this story nearly word for word, we can gain some insight on this question.

In Mark's account, James and John are on a boat with their father and some *hired hands*. This would seem to suggest that the family business had done well enough for them that they were providing employment for the locals. So, instead of the usual picture of the ignorant and naive fishermen who gave up a wretched life of fishing and followed Jesus as simple-minded vessels waiting to be filled by his wisdom, we have a somewhat prosperous, or at least economically stable, local family whose sons run the risk of debilitating the family business, and/or alienating themselves from a future stake in the company. This is an interesting social analysis perhaps, but maybe there's more to it than that. What is interesting is the contrast between the first century commercial fishing operation of the family Zebedee, and the hipwader-wearing fishing wannabees Peter and Andrew casting their little nets from the shore. The story could have been told much more simply like this: "Jesus found Peter and Andrew fishing and said, 'Follow me, for I will make you fish for people.' And they followed him. Going a little farther around the lake, he saw James and John fishing with their father Zebedee, and he called them and they too followed him." But even if the detail is incidental, just a little bit of local color thrown in by Matthew to make the story more tellable, it is color which we can spread on the canvases of our understanding, color which reminds us that disciples of Jesus can come from the boat or the shore, from any social class, any level of sophistication, any age or race or gender, with any challenge or advantage, thanks be to God. Follow first, make sure to ask questions later.

The text goes on to say that on that boat, James and John were “mending” their nets. They were washing them, picking out bits of debris and rocks and shells and whatever else might have torn the nets or prevented them from catching the most fish possible. They were folding them and putting them away, preparing for the next day’s outing on the Sea of Galilee. They were taking care of perhaps their most valuable asset besides their boat. The nets were their livelihoods. Now it so happens that the root of the Greek word in this passage for “mending” has a much wider range of meaning than just taking care of the nets, and in fact in the New Testament, it is only here and in Mark’s account of the same story that it is used to describe a tangible action such as fishermen mending their nets. The more common New Testament usage has somewhat more spiritual overtones, as in the final words of Hebrews: “Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, *make you complete* in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever.” Or as Paul writes to the church at Thessalonika, “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and *restore* whatever is lacking in your faith.” Or finally, as in 1 Corinthians, “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that *you be united* in the same mind and the same purpose.”

Now I began to wonder about this choice of word by Matthew, and its specific inclusion here. And I don't know if there were other words he could have used because I only dabble in Greek. But I do know that James and John left the mending of the nets, left their task of repairing and restoring and making complete their livelihood, to be made complete in a life following Christ. Whether or not he meant it by his choice of that word, Matthew subtly reminds us that following Christ makes us complete, restores us to the image God created us in, makes us united in one mind and one spirit. And it begs this evening and every day the question of each of us: how are we being made complete, how are we being restored as we follow Christ, how are we being united in Christ. Sure we are the Church, followers of Christ all, but how are each of us following and how well are each of us following? Follow first, make sure to ask questions later.

In addition to my stuffed sheep, Flora and I have another valued possession stored in Minnesota, one which we would most certainly be using if we were there right now, given the persistent subzero temperatures there lately. Upon the announcement of my engagement to Flora, my Grandmother presented us with a quilt she had begun making while she was pregnant with my father and then had finished a few years later. I don't know much about quilt designs, but I'm told that it is the double wedding ring pattern, which you can see pretty clearly when it is

spread out upon the bed on a beautiful summer day. But it is only when you lie upon the bed and examine the individual pieces of fabric and the intricate stitching that you see the quilt for *all* its beauty. It turns out that all the bits of colored fabric that make up the rings of the pattern are pieces of my Grandmother's maternity dresses, and as I look at each one, I sort of wonder what that would look like in more than just a two inch by two inch piece, and I wonder about my Grandmother quietly sewing and quilting and wondering what her child and perhaps her grandchildren would be like. It is plain that the quilt is beautiful and I know it's warm, and the double wedding ring pattern makes its statement, but it is when I look deeply at each of the elements that make up the whole that it becomes even richer and fuller with meaning and significance and I am able to see just how much of herself she put into it. At the same time, however, unless they had been stitched into a whole, made complete, unified, restored, each of the scraps would be in a landfill somewhere and we would be the poorer and colder for the lack of that wonderful gift.

It may be just to my eyes, but it seems to me that my grandmother's quilt captures both of the subtle messages of tonight's gospel lesson, that in Jesus Christ the church is made up of wonderfully disparate and interesting parts, and that when placed together make up something even more beautiful and useful than each may be on its own. As we follow faithfully, asking the questions we are called to ask, may God help each of our unique lives to be fitted together by Jesus Christ into a

pattern that is not only beautiful like my grandmother's quilt but that also reflects the unity and the completion and the restoration found in the disciples' lakeshore decisions to follow Christ. Amen.