

WHY YOU ARE HERE

Scriptures: Mark 1:14-20; Mark 10:28-31

When new members join our church I ask them to share with our church session about this question: What events, people, or experiences have shaped your Christian faith? What has led you to want to follow Jesus?

The answers people give to this question are always interesting and often touching. People talk about how their parents or grandparents took them to church and taught them about Jesus. Or they say it was their children who got them going to church by asking questions they could not answer. My favorite is those who say they started attending church because they were in love with someone who went to church. I call that evangelism by romance. Others mention a crisis in their lives that made them seek God, and some—a few—say they were brought to Jesus by a pastor. They are the ones I worry about the most.

But according to Mark, none of these are the right answer. According to Mark, you are not here because of the influence of your parents or grandparents. You are not here because your children got you thinking about God or because some crisis finally convinced you that you need God's help. You are not here because of a pastor or Sunday School teacher or an evangelist that you saw on television. You are here because Jesus himself called you. Jesus himself tapped you on the shoulder and said, "Hey, you, follow me."

Before we look at our scripture reading for today, let me show you how Jesus gathers disciples in the other gospels. Take a pew Bible and turn to John, chapter 1, beginning at verse 35 (NT, p. 92). It says,

The next day John [meaning John the Baptist] again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

Now look at verses 40-42:

One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus ...

John's gospel highlights how the disciples of Jesus were brought to him by other people. That is like the stories of those who follow Jesus because of their parents or grandparents or some other important person in their lives. They are brought to Jesus by the influence of others.

Now turn to Luke, chapter 5, beginning at verse 4 (NT, p. 62). Jesus has been preaching beside the lake of Gennesaret, and verse 4 says, "When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon [meaning Simon Peter], 'Put out into the deep water and let down the nets.'" Verse 5 says, "Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.'"

Here is an example of someone coming to Jesus in a crisis. No fish means no food for the family and no income to maintain the boats and the nets. If this goes on too long Peter's business will collapse. So he turns to Jesus, like many people do when they are in trouble, and Jesus helps him. They haul in a huge catch of fish, and verse 11 says, "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him."

In John's gospel, the disciples follow Jesus because of the influence of others. In Luke's gospel they follow Jesus because Jesus helps them through a crisis. Now turn to our scripture reading for today from Mark, chapter 1, and look at verses 16-18 (NT, p. 35).

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."

Do you see the difference? In Mark's gospel there are no people who tell Simon and Andrew about Jesus before they meet him. There are no miracles performed by Jesus to persuade them of his power. This does not mean the other gospels are wrong, only that Mark tells the story differently. Mark completely ignores the events, people, and experiences that might have shaped the disciples' faith. Jesus calls, and the disciples follow. That's it!

According to Mark, if you are here in church today, if you are here wanting to be a follower of Jesus, it's not because of your parents, grandparents, or friends. Least of all is it because of your pastor. You are here because Jesus chose you. You are here today because Jesus himself has been working in your heart to bring you here, whether you knew it or not.

And that brings me to one of the most important points in today's scripture reading. When Jesus calls the disciples, he says, "Follow *me*." He does not say, "Follow my teaching, keep my commandments, or adopt my philosophy of life." That is what Buddha would have said, or Mohammed, or Confucius, or Socrates.

In a collection of essays called *God in the Dock*, C. S. Lewis writes,

If you had gone to Buddha and asked him, 'Are you the son of Bramah?' he would have said, 'My son, you are still in the vale of illusion.' If you had gone to Socrates and asked, 'Are you Zeus?' he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, 'Are you Allah?' he would first have rent his clothes and then cut off your head (pp. 157-158).

None of these people would have said, "Follow me." They were prophets or teachers. They would have said, "Follow my teaching. Follow the path that I am laying out for you."

But Jesus said, "Follow me." Why? The hint is given earlier in Mark 1:15. Jesus says, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." Now what did Jesus mean by that? In the pages that follow Jesus heals many sick people, but not everyone. Jesus feeds many who are hungry, but not everyone. At the end of Mark's gospel Pontius Pilate is still in power, and many innocent people are still suffering. In what sense has the kingdom of God come near?

There is only one possible answer. The kingdom of God has come near in Jesus himself. Any hope of setting things right in this world, and any hope of setting things right in your own life, will be found in your relationship to Jesus himself, which is why he personally calls you to follow him.

Think about it. If you follow Jesus only because of the influence of your parents, you are following your parents and not Jesus. If you follow Jesus only because of a pastor or a spouse, you are following them and not Jesus. This is a dangerous thing to do, because eventually you will discover, if you haven't already, that your parents or your pastor or your spouse is a big disappointment. You will discover that they are human and fallible and cannot save even themselves, let alone you or the rest of the world.

But Jesus can, and that is why you are invited to this table. In communion you are not offered a philosophy of life. If that were the case, there would be a book on the table, not a loaf of bread. What you are offered at this table is Jesus himself. That is the mystery of communion. This is Jesus' body broken for you. This is Jesus' blood shed for you. A book cannot forgive you, but Jesus can. A pastor, parent, or friend cannot raise you from the dead and give you eternal life, but Jesus can. And that is the real reason for being here.

- Ken Onstot
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