

Followers and Fans
Rev. Cindy Maddox
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Matthew 4:12-23

I've never liked the fishing metaphor for discipleship.

The King James translation "fishers of men" sounds more like a dating app than a discipleship plan.

"I will make you fish for people" in the New Revised Standard Version is better, but I still have a cartoon image in my mind of a pastor fishing in a sea of people and one guy is hooked in the lip and is being hauled, wiggling, ashore.

"We don't hook and land unwitting congregants, and we don't cast our nets . . . in order to haul in another unsuspecting catch: obviously.

I doubt Jesus had any such thing in mind

when he called out to Peter and Andrew by the Sea of Galilee....

He was starting a conversation with *fishermen*.

Fishing was what they knew and did best.

And Jesus begins right there: not with what *he* knows, but with what *they* know

He doesn't tell fishermen, 'Come, and I will make you a carpenter.'"¹

But here's the part that has always left me rather flummoxed.

Just one word, actually, though it is used twice.

Jesus calls Simon Peter and Andrew,

and *immediately* they leave their nets and follow.

Jesus calls James and John,

and *immediately* they leave their father in the boat and follow.

How do you do that?

How do you leave behind everything—

the tools of your trade, your livelihood, your family, your responsibilities!—
without even a thought to your future?

Is there a single one of us who would do such a crazy thing?

Are we really supposed to believe they did? Immediately?

I can't even choose where we're going for dinner immediately.

But here, we are told, are four ordinary people
choosing to give up everything they know

¹ Florence, Anna Carter. "Preaching the Lesson: Matthew 4:12-23." www.goodpreacher.com.

in order to follow a stranger.
 Maybe they thought they were just following Jesus around the corner—
 like “Hey, come here! I want to show you something!”
 Surely the decision to actually “follow Jesus” with their lives
 took a little more time.
 Or maybe, like in our scriptural retelling this morning,
 they came to question their decision.
 What happened back there?
 What did I agree to?
 What have we done?

My first solo in church, as a young child, was “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus.”
 That was fifty some years ago, and some days, I think I’m still deciding.
 I’m still trying to figure out if I really want to do what it takes
 to be a disciple.

I am reminded of something I saw years ago that I had to look up again this week
 called “Hymns of the Lukewarm Church.”

It was a long list of familiar hymn titles,
 adjusted to more accurately reflect our true views.

- Great Is Thy Faithfulness becomes Above Average Is Thy Faithfulness
- A Mighty Fortress Is Our God becomes A Comfy Mattress Is Our God.
- Praise God from Whom All Affirmations Flow
- Joyful, Joyful, We Kinda Like Thee.
- My Hope Is Built on Nothing Much
- Oh How I Like Jesus
- Blest Be the Tie that Doesn't Cramp My Style
- Spirit of the Living God, Fall Somewhere Near Me
- Be Thou My Vision? Be Thou My Hobby

In a fascinating article Rev. Mark Sandlin bemoans some of the offensive things
 we see in pop culture,
 particularly actions by troubled young pop artists seeking attention
 and television shows that continue to push the margins of decency
 for the sake of humor.

He says the problem is that there are fans who love the bizarre behavior
 and can’t get enough of shock value television.

He writes, “There seems to be fandoms for just about everything. Unfortunately, it seems to be true of religion as well. More specifically, the Church has turned into the fandom of God when we were supposed to be ushering the [kindom] of God – and it is slowly killing the Church.”²

For those who are less familiar with the term ‘fandom’ he explains, “Wikipedia defines it as ‘a term used to refer to a subculture composed of fans characterized by a feeling of sympathy and camaraderie with others who share a common interest.’

And therein [lies] our problem.”³

He wrote this article a decade ago but it is even more true now than it was then.

When you think about what has happened to Christianity within the last few decades, it’s easy to see the man has a point.

Too much of contemporary Christianity has become “a subculture composed of fans characterized by a feeling of sympathy and camaraderie with others” like them.

Surrounded by their fandom, they see the world through very limited lenses; they see persecution where there is none; they believe our nation is theirs to control; and they condemn to hell anyone who believes differently.

This isn’t building the kindom of God; it’s building the fandom of God. And it is leading to Christian nationalism, which is terrifying.

Rev. Sandlin goes on to say:

“The ultimate downfall of the fandom of God is that it creates a self-appointed, elitist community too concerned with regulating [and] disciplining . . . to invest the appropriate amount of time outside of its physical and self-imposed walls.”

Ouch, right?

Good thing it’s not about us.

It’s about those other churches, not us.

We in the liberal church, for the most part, are not guilty of this.

² Sandlin, Mark. “The Fandom of God Is Upon Us and Its Killing the church.” Huff Post Religion. 11/11/13.

³ Ibid.

We are not just fans of God.
 No, we are fans of Jesus.
 We love what Jesus did:
 he went around healing the sick and feeding the hungry,
 associating with sinners and welcoming the outcasts.
 We love that about him, and rightfully so.
 But being a fan of Jesus doesn't make us a follower.
 "Liking" his Facebook page doesn't make us a friend.
 And doing good deeds alone doesn't make us a disciple.

Having spent time at both ends of the Christian spectrum,
 I believe that one of the differences is where we start.
 Conservative Christians start with belief, with faith.
 They start with a relationship with God or Jesus.
 And, at its best, that belief, that relationship, empowers them
 to love as God loves and to do as Jesus would do.
 More liberal churches, on the other hand, start with action.
 We do the things that Jesus did:
 we try to heal the sick (or at least help them get access to healthcare),
 we feed the hungry, we welcome the outcasts.
 And at its best, that action leads us
 into deeper relationship with the Divine.
 But too often we stop before that happens.
 Too often we do all the right things of following Jesus
 except getting to know Jesus,
 having a relationship with the risen Christ or the Spirit or the Divine Breath
 or whatever imagery and name works for you.
 If we are going to be true followers of Jesus,
 if we are going to leave behind our nets and our boats
 then we need to know the one we are following.

Now, I realize that this makes some of you nervous.
 To be honest, it makes me a bit nervous, too!
 That whole "relationship with Jesus Christ" thing comes with a lot of baggage
 and has some scary connotations!
 Plus we have different definitions of the divine.
 How do you have a relationship with God

if you believe God is essence rather than being?
 if you have left behind a belief in an anthropomorphic God?
 If a relationship with God or Christ or Spirit doesn't work for you,
 how about a deeper connection to the Divine?
 Does following Jesus lead you into a deeper connection with the Divine?

Either way, it means being more than fans of Jesus.

Oh, that's a fine place to start.

It can motivate us to action on behalf of others.

But being a follower of Jesus (rather than just a fan)

will sustain us for the long haul.

Being a follower of Jesus will empower us to keep working

when hope seems lost.

Christ calls us to follow, to leave behind our nets of self-involvement,

to leave behind our boats of self-sufficiency

to leave behind the tools of our self-hatred.

And we would rather stay where we are than take the risk . . .

because make no mistake, following Jesus is often a risk.

We may have to change the way we spend our money.

We may have to change the way we view other people.

We may have to change . . . yeah, that's it. We may have to change.

Now, I doubt that we do much of anything "immediately"

as we are told the disciples did.

We are UCC-ers, after all, which means it often takes four team meetings

and a congregational vote to change the proverbial light bulb.

So we may not make decisions "immediately."

But the call is still urgent . . .

the call to do, yes, but also the call to be;

the call to action, but also the call to relationship, to connection.

We choose to follow—

to proclaim the good news, to offer the cures of hope and grace

to others and to ourselves.

We choose to follow –

in faithfulness and faithlessness, in communion and community.

And we just may need to leave some safety nets behind. Amen.