

FOLLOW YOU?

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As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and they followed him. (Matthew 4:21-22)

Last Thursday morning I was reading *The New York Times* and saw in the obituaries a name that rang a bell. Jack Van Impe, who died on January 18, was a televangelist based in suburban Detroit, where I spent the first six years of my ordained ministry. I remember when he would appear on TV with his wife, Rexella. This was the late 1980s, and their big hair was eclipsed only by their big message: that the apocalypse was now, the end times were upon us, and it had all been foretold in Biblical prophecies thousands of years ago. To support his claims he would pepper his message with a deluge of loosely connected Biblical verses. I confess, Van Impe had a certain hypnotic, mesmerizing appeal. At the same time I wondered, “How could anyone fall for this stuff?”

It was 25 years ago when I moved away from Michigan, and I haven’t since made a habit of tuning in to late-night cable TV evangelists. But in all this time Jack Van Impe appears to have grown in influence. Today you can go online and find a substantial internet presence: his website, videos of his sermons at packed arenas and megachurches, and his news program called “Jack Van Impe Presents.” The announcer begins: “From the heartland of America to every nation on earth...” His final broadcast was as recent as January 10, and in it he predicted that Russia, China, and other communist terrorists were going to attack Israel. The ensuing seven-year war would be the bloodiest in all of human history. But, he declared with a smile, true Christians will be raptured and spared the ordeal.

I mean no disrespect for the dead, nor do I wish to sit in judgement over another Christian, regardless of how aberrant his beliefs may be. But the troubling truth is, Jack Van Impe’s preaching was hardly off the beaten path. The obituary notes that he inspired the ministries of numerous megachurch pastors – many of whom are preaching to more people this very day than I am. I wonder, and I worry. What does an unchurched generation think about Christianity? Does being a Christian mean subscribing to views like those of Jack Van Impe? What does the watching world think it means to follow Jesus?

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew presents a scene that arouses in me some of the same wonder and worry that I associate with preachers like Jack Van Impe. It was a typical day on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. A man named Zebedee ran a somewhat successful fishing business there with his two sons, James and John. One day along came Jesus, the popular preacher who was proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. Jesus approached Zebedee and his sons in their boat mending their nets, and he called to James and John. *Immediately they left the boat and their father, and they followed him.* So it was that these two brothers all at once dropped everything, and without question became followers of Jesus. I wonder about the scene, and I worry about the manner in which we usually interpret the calling of the disciples. What we think leads to a number of assumptions – assumptions that may be terribly off the mark. So whether we are speaking from the heartland of America, or from here in the godless northeast, we would do well to proclaim to every nation on earth a good answer to the question, what does it mean to follow Jesus? Let our first order of business be to cast off some of the erroneous assumptions.

The first assumption is that the disciples of Jesus left their various trades never to return to them as long as they were in the company of Jesus. Whether they were fishermen, tax collectors, farmers, carpenters, lawyers, or toolmakers, Jesus presented them with a higher calling. No longer would they have time for these less important occupations. Jesus would lead them to the places and people where real ministry needed to happen. We imagine that for the next three years, seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day, the twelve disciples would be walking in the company of Jesus: following him, soaking in his teachings, witnessing his miracles, and never leaving his presence.

The next assumption logically follows: the disciples of Jesus, upon hearing his call, left their families just as quickly and decisively as they left their trades. James and John left their father Zebedee in the boat – not a word of good-bye, not a feeling of remorse. I’ve always felt sorry for poor Zebedee. We can imagine that James and John had probably tagged at their father’s heels since they were toddlers. Once they were old enough to work, Zebedee was probably proud to pass on to them what he knew of life and living. But loyalty to Jesus will leave no more room for particular friendships and family relationships. They are, again, less important. *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father, and mother, and wife and children ... and, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26)*. These are the marks of the true disciple of Jesus, who leaves everything and everyone to follow him.

The final assumption I think is the most erroneous of all. It is the belief that Jesus was so obviously the messiah – so hypnotic in his appeal – that people fell into a spell in his presence and followed him without any hesitation. *Immediately they left the boat and their father, and they followed him*. Real disciples don’t ask questions, they don’t doubt, they just follow. Here is where my wondering and worrying kicks into high gear. This isn’t right. Don’t fall for this nonsense. How many parents like Zebedee have watched helplessly as their children were entangled in some cult, or carried away by some overheated cause, or entwined with some destructive lover? It’s no wonder why many people today – Christians included – secretly have reservations about getting too serious with religion. Watch out for Jesus! If he singles you out to be a disciple, it will be at the expense of your family and your livelihood.

These are the conclusions people have reached regarding the calling of the disciples and the life they subsequently led. I believe we can draw different conclusions. I believe we can, we should, and we must take a fresh look at what it meant to follow Christ then, and what it means to be one of his followers now, today. The first thing to say is that Jesus wasn’t some hypnotic stranger who appeared out of nowhere and beckoned people to follow him. He wasn’t a cult leader. He didn’t cast a spell over people so that they would obey him with the blank stare of a brainwashed fundamentalist. Rather, the Gospels give us evidence to consider that James and John knew Jesus well. Their mother was a woman named Salome who, many believe, was the sister of Mary, Jesus’ mother. If indeed Salome and Mary were sisters, then Zebedee was an uncle of Jesus, and James and John were his first cousins. Imagine: Jesus came to them not as a strange mystic from out of the blue. He came to them as someone they knew.

Furthermore, although James and John left Zebedee at that moment, we see the disciples, and even Jesus himself, continuing in their family relations. Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law. You heard it right: Peter had a mother-in-law. Follow the logic, now: if Peter had a mother-in-law, then Peter had a wife. Peter and Andrew are many times listed as brothers, as are James and John. So those brotherly relations, with all the sibling rivalry, loyalty, and affection continued. James and John continued to have contact with their mother, Salome, who once asked Jesus if her two sons might sit on either side of him when he came into his glory. Such an outlandish request only begins to make sense if, in fact, Salome was Jesus’ aunt. Jesus also spent much time with his mother, Mary, and with his brothers and sisters. Yes, Jesus had brothers and sisters, and while those relations were indeed strained at times, still they continued. All of their family relations continued, even though, at that moment, *they left their nets and followed Jesus*.

Finally, I believe it's unrealistic to think that the disciples never had a minute, or a day, or a week, or even a month to themselves during the three years they followed Jesus. Not only did Peter have a wife, he also had a house and a boat that Jesus put to sacred use during his public ministry. Could it be that during the three years they were together, Jesus would periodically mobilize his disciples for a specific mission, after which they would return to their homes, families, and occupations? I think it's a possibility that might account for all the varying "call" stories in the Gospels. It's a possibility that suggests Jesus called people to be his followers in the midst of their lives. The lives they were living, the families they were loving, and the trades they were practicing all mattered to Jesus. Everything from the way they conducted business, to the way they mended their nets, to their domestic responsibilities of raising children and doing chores mattered. These were among the places where Jesus would have his followers – then and now – introduce and practice the ethics of the kingdom of God he spent so much time teaching them. The simple places. The everyday places. If they couldn't be followers of Jesus there, they probably weren't much use to him anywhere else.

In the Collect of the Day we will pray for the grace *to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ*. Hopefully we've cleared away some of our reservations and fears about what it might mean in practice to be a follower of Jesus. Still, you will hear from some quarters that to be a real disciple you have to depart into flights of fantasy, and fall for ideas that make no sense: "It's the end of the world as we know it!" Or you must subscribe to antiquated codes of morality, or witness publicly to strangers, or wear a clerical collar around your neck, or at least walk around feeling guilty about most things – if you're *really* a disciple. Granted, some people really *should* walk around feeling guilty about the way they are living their lives, and Christ does call people to the mission field. But for most of us the calling to be a disciple of Jesus happens right where we are, within the relationships we have, doing the work we are doing. No matter how ordinary, or mundane, or routine our lives may be, this is where the real ministry of Christ needs to happen. If we can't be followers of Jesus in these places, we probably aren't going to be much use to him anywhere else.

I'm reminded here of an old fable about a poor farmer. One night the farmer dreamed that someday soon he would become fantastically wealthy, and it would all be the result of finding diamonds. The dream was so vivid that the farmer determined he must embark on a quest to find the diamonds. Against the advice of everyone he knew he sold his farm and convinced his extended family to take in his wife and children. "Trust me," he said, "I will return with riches beyond imagining and I will share it with you." Then he departed for a far country to discover the diamonds he believed were his destiny. Of course, as is often the case in these fables, the farmer found no treasure. He returned to his family penniless and despondent, without even his farm to support them.

Meanwhile, the man who bought the farm had moved onto the land and began working it. He plowed the fields, he scattered the seed, he harvested the crops. One spring he noticed that as his plough broke the earth, it kept overturning strange rocks that he occasionally picked up and collected in his home. It was only when he showed one to a friend that he learned that the rocks, were in fact, diamonds. As for the first farmer, the diamonds had been right there, right beneath his feet the whole time.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven has come near. Follow me," What does it mean? Where shall we go? I believe his call is to the simple places, to the everyday places, to be his disciples among the most difficult crowd of all: the people we know, the people we see every day, the people right under our noses, all the time.

"Follow me," said Jesus to James and John. "Follow me," says Jesus to you and to me.