

“Follow Me”
Matthew 4:18-22
Second Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

In one of his sermons, Ted Wardlaw describes the move he made from pastoring a church in Atlanta—this was some 15-20 years ago—to accepting the job as President of Austin Seminary.

And he talks in that sermon about the way that God called him to that new role in his life.

He spoke about the excitement of being chosen,
the honor of being asked,
and the promise of what lay ahead.

But he also admits that at the time, the offer left him “rattled”.

Rattled by what was at stake,
rattled by voices that OPPOSED his nomination,
rattled by conflicts within the larger church,
forces TUGGING this way,
that way...

He was rattled by his own fears.
So what did he do?

In between the time when he accepted the call, and the time when the seminary board was going to meet to approve the call, Ted called the chair of the search committee back and said he wanted out.

He told the chair that he wasn’t sure this was God’s idea.
He told the chair that they could find a better person,
that he should have said, “no” instead of “yes”.

And instead of getting mad, or saying, “suit yourself,” the chair of the search committee very calmly said, “I know just how you feel,” and proceeded to talk Ted back around to saying yes.¹

¹ “News From Our Forebears: The Calling Voice,” by Theodore J. Wardlaw, in *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2003.

Ted Wardlaw is, I believe, one of the finest leaders in our denomination.

I wonder...when he first moved to Austin with his family, was he able to leave his doubts behind?

When Jesus called him to become Austin Seminary's next president, was he able to leave his fears, and his hesitation about accepting that position—
was he able to leave it all back in Atlanta?

I've never asked Ted that question.
But I raise the question this morning because of our text.

Jesus sees two brothers, Peter and Andrew.

*And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."
Immediately, they left their nets and followed him.*

*As he went from there, he saw two brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee...and he called them.
Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.*

Please note what the text does NOT say.

The text does NOT say that Jesus called, and Peter said, "Sounds like a good idea. Let me tie up the loose ends of our fishing business, talk this over with Andrew, and I'll shoot you an email first thing next week after I've had some time to think this through."

The text does not say that.
The text does not say:

"James and John turned to their father, Zebedee, and said, 'Come on, dad. Join us on this journey!' And Zebedee joined them...'

The text does not say that either.
The text does not say that they debated or delayed,
or consulted with one another,
or sent it on to committee for more consideration.

I searched a little more, and then I bumped into the Apostle Paul.
He was describing what it was like for him.

“...whatever gains I had,” Paul said to me, “these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ...For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...”

Paul told me that he had suffered the loss of all things?!
Paul knew what it was like to leave a life that he LOVED...behind.

Now let's be clear.
I'm not asking you to leave everything you love about *your* life behind.
That's not the point of this sermon.

I'm just asking you to join me on this search.

I'm on a search, you see, a search for the time when Jesus calls someone, says to someone, “Follow me,” and that person does NOT have to leave anything behind.

Will you join me on this search?

Maybe, as you join me on this search, a thought might just cross your mind about what it is that Jesus may be asking you to leave behind...

It could be a grudge.
It could be grief.
It could be guilt.

Or for some in this room it could be something good:

It could be doing something that you have truly loved doing—but you know the time is probably upon you to stop doing the thing that you have loved doing...

But I'd really like you to join me on this search, because if we can find the person who didn't have to leave anything behind, then maybe we can become the church of people who have figured out the SECRET!

How to follow Jesus without ever leaving anything behind.
Boy, I bet folks would FLOCK to a church like that!

You know who I bumped into—maybe I should say WE bumped into—next on this search?

I ran into the late writer, Reynolds Price.

You see, when Reynolds Price wrote about what it was like to survive spinal cancer—a cancer that came upon him in mid-life, and it literally divided his life in two—and after cancer, he could not walk,

he was confined to a wheelchair—
he wrote about leaving his old life behind...

And he described his new life after cancer as:
“A different life and...a markedly better way to live...”

I said to him, “Wait. A *better* way to live?”
I said, “Mr. Price, how can you say that AFTER cancer,
in a wheelchair,
your life was BETTER?”

He replied: “I’ve tested that word better for the stench of sentimentality, narcissism, blind optimism, or lunacy...”

Then he explained:

“...paraplegia, with its maddening limitations has forced a degree of patience and consequent watchfulness on me...Shortly after my own paralysis, I heard two of Franklin Roosevelt’s sons say that the primary change in their father, after polio struck him in mid-life...was an increased patience
and a willingness to listen.

“As I survived the...frustration of so many new forms of powerlessness, I partly learned to sit and attend, to watch and taste whatever or whomever seemed likely or needy, far more closely than I had in five decades.”²

He was describing leaving something behind—not as a BAD thing, but as a GOOD thing.

To be clear, Reynolds Price did not say that God wanted him to get spinal cancer, or that his disease was a part of some divine plan.

No...Price just said that even in the midst of his cancer,
and then after his cancer,
Jesus came to him.

And Jesus said, “Follow me.”

And something in that following,
and leaving his old life behind...
it set Reynolds Price free.

Maybe that’s another way to say it.
When Jesus says, “Follow me,” what Jesus wants is for us to be free.

Not free to do whatever we choose to do at whatever time for whatever pleasure...

But free to be the person God has called us to be.

Free to be more courageous in the face of fear.
Free to be more hopeful in the face of hatred.
Free to be peaceful and gentle in a society consumed with aggression and violence and competition and consumption...

Free because we’re no longer carrying whatever baggage is slowing us down as Jesus walks ahead of us, leading us...

² Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life*, New York: Atheneum, 1994.

Of course, I say all that, and then I have my doubts.

And I try to convince myself that I really can follow Jesus without leaving anything behind.

That I can keep the same viewpoints, the same opinions,
 the same living standards, the same worries,
 that I can keep everything about me THE SAME,
 and just add Jesus to the mix.

That's what this search is all about.
 An effort on my part NOT to change.

So...in an effort to keep everything about my life the same, I went out for a walk.

And it started to rain.
 Usually, I go inside when it rains, but this time, I decided to walk a bit in the rain.

And you know what I did?
 I told the rain about my search...our search.
Are you still with me on this search?

I had a conversation with the rain.

I know. That sounds a little weird.
 But you see, when I explained my search to the rain, the rain started telling me a story.

The rain spoke of a time when it was
 "a gentle rain falling on a high mountain
 in a distant land.

The rain was at first hushed and quiet, trickling down granite slopes.

Gradually it increased in strength, as rivulets of water rolled over the rocks and down the gnarled, twisted trees that grew there. The rain fell, as water must, without calculation....[after all], water never has time to practice falling.

Soon it was pouring,
 as swift currents of dark water flowed together
 into the beginnings of a stream.

The brook made its way down the mountainside...
 It moved without effort, splashing over stones—learning that the stream interrupted by rocks is the one that sings most nobly.

Finally, having left its height in the distant mountain,
 the stream made its way to the edge of a great desert.

Sand and rock stretched beyond seeing.

Having crossed every other barrier in its way, the stream fully expected to cross this as well. But as fast as its waves splashed into the desert, that fast did they disappear into the sand.

Before long, the stream heard a voice whispering,
 as if coming from the desert itself,
 saying, ‘The wind crosses the desert, so can the stream.’

‘Yes, but the wind can fly!’ cried out the stream, still dashing itself into the desert sand.

‘You’ll never get across that way,’ the desert whispered.
‘You have to let the wind carry you.’

‘But how?’ shouted the stream.
 ‘You have to let the wind absorb you.’

[You have to let yourself be changed...]

The stream could not accept this, however, not wanting to lose its identity or abandon its own individuality. After all, if it gave itself to the winds, could it ever be sure of becoming a stream again?

The desert replied that the stream could continue its flowing, perhaps one day even producing a swamp there at the desert's edge. But it would never cross the desert so long as it remained a stream.

'Why can't I remain the same stream that I am?' the water cried.

And the desert answered, ever so wisely, 'You never can remain what you are. Either you become a swamp or you give yourself to the winds.'

The stream was silent for a long time,
 listening to distant echoes of memory,
 knowing parts of itself having been held before
 in the arms of the wind.

From that long-forgotten place,
 it gradually recalled how water conquers only by yielding,
 by flowing around obstacles,
 by turning to steam when threatened by fire.

From the depths of that silence, slowly the stream raised its vapors to the welcoming arms of the wind and was borne upward, carried easily on great white clouds over the wide desert waste.

Approaching distant mountains on the desert's far side, the stream then began once again to fall as a light rain. At first it was hushed and quiet, trickling down granite slopes...

And soon it was pouring, as swift currents of dark water flowed together—yet again—into the headwaters of a new stream.”³

Are you still with me on my search?

My search for the person to whom Jesus says, “Follow me”—
 and that person follows Jesus,
 but that person leaves nothing,
 gets rid of nothing,

³ Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

it costs them nothing,
and it changes them not a whit...

I still haven't found this person.

I wonder what would happen if I stopped my search.
I wonder what would happen if I stopped my search, and instead of talking
to the rain, I talked with Jesus.

And I asked Jesus, "Jesus, what do I have to leave behind to be your faithful
disciple at this time in my life?"

And Jesus says, "Follow me, and I'll show you..."

And if I say "Yes, Jesus, I will follow you wherever you go,
no matter the cost, no what I have to leave behind..."

If I say that, will you join me?

(Amen.)