

“Mending Their Nets” / Matthew 4:12, 17-23 / 26 January 2014

“Follow me,” the stranger said, when he turned up on the beaches of their world. “Follow me,” he said, though they didn't know who he was or where he would lead them. All he said was, “Follow me.” And they did! They left behind their boats, and their nets, their livelihoods and even their aging father, to follow. What made them do it? What private dissatisfaction with their lives, what secret restlessness made them up and follow?

So, we're going to start the sermon today with a game show...except that there are no contestants and, well, nobody wins, or loses. But most importantly of all, nobody makes any noise. No happy squealing, no jumping up and down when you get the right answer, and certainly no clapping! It's a strictly Presbyterian game show, which as you know, means that there will be no expressions of emotion; no one will ever know if you got an answer right; you'll just keep your joy to yourself. Now, bear with me, our game show doesn't have the catchiest of names. It's called “Duty or Calling,” and here's how the game show works: I—of course—will be your game show host; think of me as a short Howie Mandel. I will give you a handful of scenarios, real life situations where people are faced with the need to act, and for each of them, I will ask you, “Duty or calling?” Is it something the person does from a sense of responsibility, or is it something the person gets to do for the joy of it, something that might be hard but rewarding, something the person does simply because of who he or she is.

Okay, are you ready? Here's your first game show question. It's Saturday night at 9:00. You've just settled into your armchair in front of the TV to watch *Cops*, or *Auction Hunters*, or *48 Hours*, when you get a phone call from someone at the church. Can you host for coffee hour tomorrow? The person who was supposed to do it is sick. Besides, you make the best almond cookies. Could you possibly spend the next two hours baking those outstanding cookies, then come in tomorrow morning and host coffee hour at the church? Could you, please? Well, we all know that you never say no to anyone. In fact, as you're rolling out the cookie dough, it occurs to you that that might be exactly the reason they called on you: because you never say no. And are they using flattery to get you to do it? “The best almond cookies!” Well, it's too late now. You have to make the cookies and host coffee hour. Are you doing your task out of duty, or is it a calling?

How about an easier one? You're a parent, a father or mother, and your four-year old child wakes you up in the middle of the night with a bad dream. The kid won't go back to sleep; you've got an early morning at work, and you really need your sleep, but you decide to sit up, hold your child in your arms until—after about an hour and a half—sleep finally returns. Did you do perform that common kind task as a parental duty, or is loving care for your family part of the calling to which God has appointed you?

Okay, now it's time for the lightning round: Your doctor tells you you need to go onto medication, but you hate taking pills: duty or calling? A friend calls in desperate need of help, just as you're leaving to celebrate your fortieth anniversary: duty or calling? You're stressed, and anxious, and the people who love you are worried about you; they want you to see a therapist: duty or calling? You hold your first grandchild gently in your arms, and it occurs to you that you want to be there for this child, and it's time to start eating right, or to stop smoking, or to start exercising: duty or calling? You've got a beautiful singing voice that you've always been afraid of using, but the music director asks you to sing a solo on Christmas Eve: duty or calling? There are big changes down at the office, and it means working late for a whole month: duty or calling?

Your fishnets need mending, for you're a fisherperson. Your aging father is there in the boat; he can't do the job alone. There are fish that need catching: mackerels and bluegill and herring. Then some stranger turns up on the beaches of your busy world and says, “Follow me.” Something inside of you bids you to follow. Duty or calling? Amid all the endless demands that life places on you, the bottomless lists of tasks that you are asked to perform, all the worthwhile causes that you are asked to support, how do you know which ones you have been created for and which ones are merely draining off your energies? What are your callings in life, and what is getting in the way of them?

Well, I'm pretty sure that our game show—"Duty or Calling"—is never going to make it on prime time TV. It just doesn't have the same zing as *Family Feud* or *Jeopardy*. And yet, I daresay that it's a game each of us plays most days of our lives. In a world where we must decide each day where to invest our limited energies, where to dedicate our limited attentions, where to spend our cares, aren't we forever prioritizing those things that seem the most pressing, ranking things in order of seeming importance?

Well, let's see how you did as a mild-mannered contestant on our game show: If you said "duty" to every single question, then you could be right. Each of these tasks in themselves could be a mere duty, something to be done out of responsibility and obligation. Sadly, though, if we are duty-bound, then all of life becomes a dreary list of demands to meet. On the other hand, if you said "calling" to every single one, then you too could be right. For the ministry of hospitality is indeed a calling, especially if you do make the world's best almond cookies. And making your child feel safe is likewise one of the highest callings I can imagine. It's a calling to care for yourself and to minister to a friend in need. It's a calling to use your talents wisely and well. And if your career is a thing you love, if it's the thing that you were created to do in life, then it too is a calling. All of life can be a calling...if you will embrace its many tasks and treat them not as burdens but as privileges.

The gulls were screaming down on the shore, just as they had done for centuries, just as they are doing still. Gentle waves lapped against the pebbly strand, knocking old fishing boats into each other with a rhythmic thud. The stranger showed up and simply said, "Follow me," and the strangest thing of all—the four of them just up and followed. Now, I don't know why Jesus waited until his old mentor John the Baptist was thrown in prison before taking on himself the task—the calling—of speaking hard truths to the powers of his day. Perhaps he didn't feel the need to do it until the "voice in the wilderness" was silenced. But a bigger question for us today is, "Why did Andrew, and Peter, and James, and John just up and follow?" What was going on in their personal lives that enabled them to leave everything behind to follow after the stranger on the beach? Were they bored? Were they having a bad fishing week? Did they see Jesus as their opportunity to see the world, the glories of Jerusalem, the towns beyond the Sea of Galilee that had been their whole life? Did they look to him for adventure, or escape, or even national restoration? We will never know what caused them to leave it all behind and cast their lot with the stranger on the beach. We do know that these four are mentioned more frequently than all the other disciples, that Jesus always treated them as his closest friends.

And you, in your pew! Weren't you just going about the business of your life, weren't you mending your nets, or casting your nets, or counting your catch, when the living Mystery of Christ turned up on the beaches of your life and bid you follow? Why are you a person of faith, if you are? How did the journey begin? And did it take you to places you never expected to go—places perhaps like this very room? This simple command echoes down through the centuries, speaking its bold and reckless claim on your life and on mine. "Follow me." Leave behind all the things that seem to matter so much, and throw your life into a quest that matters more. There's urgency here, today, now. Your calling is to follow. Poor, Christ-haunted soul that you are, you could not look away. You could not turn from the stranger on the beach. You had to up and follow! Trading all the duties and demands of this life for a calling!

The Huffington Post is doing a series of articles about college graduates who can't make enough money to support themselves and their families, so they work at service jobs, unrelated to their college major, usually earning \$10 or \$15 an hour and unable to pay off their student loans. Many of them work in nursing homes, or as security guards, or at big box stores. The majority of them hold down two or even three jobs, hurrying from one workplace directly to the next without having time to go home and kiss the wife and kids in between, much less take a nap or shower. These are people who thought the American dream would include them, but somehow it passed them by, leaving them with lots of debt, no career, no free time, and very little satisfaction in life. The fellow in one of the articles made a big gamble and majored in philosophy, thinking he'd go for a PhD and get a job lecturing in a

university. Now he makes \$14 an hour as an aide at a retirement home. He helps people with their medications, helps them with their personal grooming and other private needs. Every time he buys groceries for his little family of three, he picks up a few extra cheap items that are on sale, and these food items he deposits in a rainy day box. Once he and his family lived for two months off the extra canned beans, and discontinued soups, and Ramen noodles that they had the foresight to put aside each time they went to the grocery store. He's trying to get an additional job because his wife is Canadian, and she's not allowed to work. It sounds like an anomaly, like some kind of extraordinary glitch in a system that, otherwise, guarantees plenty for most of us. But suburban poverty is becoming a very common thing. Educated people living in poverty are no longer rare. Many, many people—perhaps even the majority of people in our nation today—are doing everything they can just to get by. What happened to the nation where we all believed that hard work and honesty would be enough to guarantee you a decent life? What happened to my grandfather's America where even a brickyard employee could expect two weeks off in the summer, a secondhand car, a living wage with tolerable pension and a gold watch at retirement? That America is gone, and it's not because there's less money in circulation. It's because humanity is no longer served by wealth; we are ruled by it. And it is a tyrant.

If you were the fellow in the *Huffington Post* article, I imagine that church with its committees and offerings would seem like just another long list of unnecessary duties to be avoided at all cost. In a world where even the educated must work thanklessly and endlessly, where even a college degree cannot spare you from drudgery, I am quite certain that people are not looking for more duties to take upon themselves. And yet, callings are not duties; they are burdens that we take upon ourselves gladly, though they are heavy. Callings are the loads that we shoulder with joy simply because we love the cause, or the people that they serve. Weren't Peter, and Andrew, and James, and John among the dispossessed of their day, working their calloused fingers to the bone? And didn't they rejoice to cast aside their nets, leave their boats, and follow Jesus' call? There is not a person who does not long for the sense of purpose, the sense of direction that the call of Christ confers upon them!

"Hi sweetheart, this is daddy," the man said into the phone. "Is mommy nearby?" "No, daddy, she's upstairs with Uncle Paul." "But sweetie, you don't have an Uncle Paul," the man replied. "Sure I do, daddy. He always comes when you're at work." The man thought for a moment, then said, "Okay, here's what I want you to do: Go knock on the door and tell them my car is in the driveway." After a few minutes the girl returns and says, "Daddy, when I told them that, Uncle Paul jumped out the window and landed in the swimming pool—but there's no water in the pool, and now he's not moving." The man hesitated and said, "Swimming pool? I'm afraid I have the wrong number." When the call of Christ sounds loud and clear in your life, bidding you to follow, you might be quite certain that it's a wrong number. But it's not, for his call is to you.

Our world, too, is Christ-haunted. Our world, too, has seen the living Christ turn up on its beaches, calling them to put aside their many preoccupations to follow after the things that truly matter. Our world is no stranger to the stranger on the beach; it is strewn with the wreckage of bell towers, and steeples, and churches. And in its big, collective heart, it knows that the way of justice and fairness is its only salvation. But the world by and large turns away from the call. The boats it cannot leave behind are mainly warships. It doesn't want to leave behind the nets of productivity and material gain, the very nets that are meant to make it happy, the same nets that entangle it like a snare. Poor, Christ-haunted world that is ours! Our world cannot bear any more duties, but what if it would answer its calling—to put aside its fear-filled ways and follow after the self-giving way of the Galilean?

Duties will drag you down and wear you out. But any duty can become a calling when you do it out of love. At some point in weeks and years, the stranger appeared on the beaches of your life, interrupting your routine, calling for your time, calling for your energies, calling for your labor and your love. And you—poor Christ-haunted soul that you are!—you could not turn away. When you walk out these doors and return to your workplace, your home, your relationships, your life: what are