

FoH Sermon – 26 Jan. 2020

Being formed into community—telling our stories into our fuller humanity
The call to repentance, the calling of disciples, and the beginning of Jesus' called life.
(Matt 4:12-25)

I want to begin this message with a reference to the 50 year history of FOH—appropriate, I hope, in light of our theme of “telling our stories”... One of the persons with significant influence in our beginnings was John W. Miller, who with his wife Louise were the principle founders of Reba Place Fellowship in 1957. The Millers relocated from RPF to Conrad Grebel College a year before the beginning of FOH, but in our beginning we used and promoted some of Miller’s writings, especially **The Christian Way**, a catechism based on the Sermon on the Mount. John, a trained Bible scholar, taught several courses at AMBS, one of which I took a year or so before FOH; the course was a provocative and intense experience for me—I recall sitting in class, at 25, almost trembling with a kind of excitement around issues of God’s present work and what it means to be a part of that reality.

I share this because in preparation for my sermon today I’ve drawn on another book by John Miller, called **Jesus at Thirty** (a gift from Verlin). Reading this book I experienced some of the same stirring that I felt in that course many years ago. John died a little over two years ago. Today I offer a simple tribute to this saint, John W. Miller, one of whose gifts was to call, with unusual clarity and acuteness, others to follow Jesus.

We’ve heard the Gospel reading from Matt. 4, the Gospel story that follows Jesus’ baptism and temptations. One thing that stands out in this text, along with the larger passage that precedes it, are the various callings that we encounter—invitations, appeals or pleas. There is first of all the call to repentance and baptism, issued by John the Baptist (chap. 3); in our text (chap.4) Jesus performs a similar call: “repent, i.e. change your hearts and lives! God’s Kingdom is here!” Then Jesus makes a more specific appeal to four fishermen: a very direct call: “follow me.”

What intrigues me is how these various callings intersect with each other, and how they engage those who hear them, how persons are moved to respond to them.

I want to begin with Jesus. Jesus isn't just the one who pronounces calls, he first of all responds to a call, that of John the Baptist, in Matt. 3. What prompted Jesus to seek baptism at the hands of John and what happened when he did?

Typically Christians assume that Jesus is somehow so different from the rest of us that we can't know, or surmise, anything about his emotions or human motivations or his personal life. How about we lay that assumption aside?

Suppose Jesus at thirty years of age has been living at home. His father is no longer living—Scripture tells us nothing of Joseph after the trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12. As eldest son, Jesus assumed a role of responsibility for the welfare of his family—mother and brothers (and sisters?). He's lived a unobtrusive and ordinary life in Nazareth as an artisan (carpenter) or business man (construction). Probably unmarried, Jesus ponders what his future is, whether there is something more for him, as he's often sensed.

He hears of his slightly older cousin John “gone radical”—living and preaching like an OT prophet in the wilderness down by the Jordan River and he's greatly intrigued. Along with other common folk, crowds of them in fact, Jesus makes the pilgrimage to see and hear John, and is deeply moved by what he encounters; in fact, it becomes a turning point in his life.

Jesus, a faithful participant in the local synagogue, knows the Scriptures. He recognizes Isaiah's prediction in the fervor of John's preaching—“a voice crying in the wilderness: *prepare the way of the Lord!*” He feels the apocalyptic urgency of the moment: a great light has come on people living darkness, in Zebulun and Naphtali, in Galilee, where he's from. And then the insistent call: “Repent! Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the Kingdom of Heaven!”

What else can this man do, this man of spiritual sensibilities, somewhat bored by the ordinariness of his life, tired of family squabbles and business dealings? What can Jesus do except respond to this call? He lets John baptize him, and then—he's seized by an awareness that never leaves him—Yahweh has claimed his humanity, his whole life! From here on, Jesus knows himself embraced by God as *Abba*, perhaps replacing the human father he lost; he knows himself deeply cherished by God.

Did this experience also somehow instill in Jesus an identity as Messiah? We don't really know. What we do know, what we're told, is that from this place, Jesus goes deeper into the wilderness and there wrestles with the grandiose postures of conventional messianic expectations. In other words, he is tempted by Satan to be the Messiah, as many expected the Messiah to be—impressive, spectacular, and powerful. Jesus turns from those temptations, away from the pretensions of triumphalist, even benevolent, lordship that dominates and compels. Instead, he chooses to be known simply as the Son of Man—the Human One, as one who serves.

That brings us to our reading for today, in Matt. 4. In vs.12 we're told Jesus returns to Galilee, but he's not the same man who came from Galilee; he's responded to a call, a claim, an embrace on his life; there's been a turning, a transformation—it's as if just now his adult life begins; at least our Scriptures represent it so.

Assuming Jesus came to the Jordan R. from his home in Nazareth, he doesn't return to live there. He seems rather to take on a role similar to his cousin, John's—a prophet-evangelist, announcing God's reign and calling for personal change. John is perhaps a kind of model-mentor for Jesus, until he's disappeared—first in prison and then beheaded. And that affects Jesus; he grieves, then leaves Judea. He goes back to Galilee, putting distance between him and the center of Jewish religious and political power. There he begins to exercise his new calling on his own.

We don't really know what continuity there was between Jesus' former life and his "called life". Perhaps we can assume that previously he exercised a certain generativity as family guardian and care giver. However, the Gospels show us a new and urgent generativity in Jesus, marked by purpose, sympathy, and joy.

Unlike John the Baptist down by Jordan River, we don't hear a scolding harshness, perhaps addressed to the Jewish elite: "You brood of vipers! Beware the wrath to come!" Jesus is certainly capable of such fierce language, but in these early chapters of Matthew, we don't hear that.

Rather, now in Galilee, Matthew tells us (Matt. 9:36), Jesus' compassion is touched, by the "troubled and helpless crowds, like sheep without a shepherd". And in the last half of Matt. 4, this compassion expresses itself in

a singular movement of spreading, infective light and goodness mirrored in the remarkable poem from Isaiah that the writer cites: this great light spreading over a land where darkness has prevailed, this land of Zebulun and Naphtali, Galilee of the Gentiles.

Jesus in his new generativity calls for repentance, a change of heart and life; not a reproach, it's "good news", to the lost sheep of Israel because it presumes the presence of God's reign—God among us. And this calling that Jesus proclaims yields healing, healing of every disease and sickness, of pain, demon-possession, epilepsy and paralysis. Jesus moves through Galilee, calling, calling. And people respond and are restored, made whole. Is this not the same calling that Jesus himself responded to when he heard it from John? And are the people who respond not experiencing the same transforming touch that Jesus experienced when he knew himself to be claimed as a cherished son of God after his baptism?

Jesus in his new generativity begins to form a new family, a "community of calling". As he begins his itinerant ministry, in Capernaum, along the Galilee Sea, he summons, so simply and directly, four people to join him in this task of summoning others. "Follow me," he calls, and they respond. Do they also experience the transforming anointing of God's Spirit, like Jesus did responding to John's call, when the dove descended on him in the Jordan River?

I guess we don't know what Peter, Andrew, James and John experienced when they dropped their nets and followed Jesus. Nor what those many diseased and wounded folks experienced when they felt Jesus' healing touch upon them. Nor those who confessed their sins and were forgiven, nor those who sought to lay down the compulsive destructive patterns of their lives. We don't know, but might we not assume it's the same Spirit working in Jesus and in all these folk, first beckoning and then transforming those who yield?

So I come to the end of this message and I'm a little uncertain: is this about calling or responding to calling? I look back on my life, and I see a number of moments when I knew myself called, knew my longing to be embraced as a son and enrolled in the family and work of God, and tasted the thirst-quenching water of the Spirit. And I also see moments when I felt a yearning

for others to know this same calling and yielding and quenching, and sought to be an agent of beckoning.

Perhaps the most poignant incident in today's text, for me, is that of Jesus' call to the four fishermen, to join him, to form a little company of calling. The call is so simple and the response so immediate. What longing prompted them to respond so directly? Do our own hearts tell us? And did they know they were being called to call others?

I think of the 50 years of FOH, how each of us has heard and responded to the call of God, and I think of the many persons who felt called to God through the life of this community. The calling hasn't always been clean and unmixed, nor has the response. And yet, God's Spirit has embraced Abba's children here, has pruned our grandiosity and upheld us in our despair, and has nurtured a generative heart among us. We have been called, we've been touched and claimed, and we've been sent to call in the name and Spirit of Jesus.