

“Getting the Band Together”

Mark 1:14-20

Jesus calls ordinary people into a relationship and a mission.

A sermon preached by
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I know I’m showing my age when I say I remember the first Blues Brothers movie in the theaters. The Blues Brothers were Jake and Elwood Blues, played by original Saturday Night Live cast members John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd. Their recurring skit on SNL was so popular, they expanded it into a movie. The plot of the movie found Jake having recently been released from prison. To fulfill a promise, Elwood picked Jake up from prison and took him to visit their old Catholic school in Chicago. They found out from the head nun that the school was about to close unless they raised \$5,000 for back taxes. The brothers were inspired and felt called by God to help their old school. But first, they had to put their old band back together to play some gigs to raise some money. Along the way, of course, there were lots of adventures.¹ This is what it looked like. (video clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4YrCFz0Kfc>)

In the Gospel of Mark, one of the first tasks of Jesus is to get his band together—his band of brothers, the guys we call the disciples. In Mark, there is no birth story or any material about the early life of Jesus. It starts with the appearance of John baptizing at the Jordan River. Jesus comes and is baptized, then he goes into the wilderness for forty days, tempted by the devil.

After that, John is arrested by King Herod. (The story of John’s imprisonment and death is in Mark chapter 6.) John’s arrest seems to signal the emergence of Jesus into ministry in Galilee. He comes preaching the word of Good News, which is very similar to what John had been preaching: “*Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!*”² The imminence of God’s Kingdom demands repentance and faith. There you have it, short and sweet. And powerful and transformational.

Following the sermon, Jesus offers the invitation (like we still do it). In the story of this invitation to the first disciples, Mark wants to make some points about what it means to follow Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God.

Who were these first disciples?³ You might think that Jesus would want some power players on his team, some blue-chip 4-and-5-star prospects. But that was not the kind of

people Jesus chose. They were not scholars in philosophy or the Law of Moses. They were not priests. They were not powerful politicians, movers and shakers of the day. They were not wealthy. Who were they? They were fishermen. Jesus found them at the lakeshore. Josephus, a former governor of Galilee and historian of the era, said there were about 330 boats fishing the Sea of Galilee in the first century C.E.⁴ There was nothing remarkable or unique about these men. What made them remarkable and unique and causes us to remember their names 2,000 years later is their relationship to Jesus Christ. They became something special because of him.

What were they doing when Jesus called them? They weren't taking seminary classes. They weren't debating great ideas in the public forums. They weren't sitting at home counting their money or ordering slaves around. They were working men. When Jesus called them, they were working. Peter and Andrew were doing some bank-fishing, standing knee-deep in the water and throwing out little circular nets that sank to the bottom and trapped the fish. James and John, along with their father Zebedee and some hired men, were mending their deep-water nets, getting ready to go back out at night to fish in the lake. That's what they did, day in and day out, except for the Sabbath. They were working.

This is how Jesus calls us. He calls to us in the midst of our everyday activities. We don't have to give up our normal life and enter a monastery or move to the desert to follow Jesus. We just have to keep on keeping on, but do it with a different attitude. Do it with an eye to the Kingdom of God. Do it with the spirit of Jesus. It makes all the difference in the world.

Paul Borthwick, an expert on global missions, was in a McDonald's in Cambridge, MA, and he noticed a young man he knew named Peter (really) working the counter. Peter was in the young adult ministry at Paul's church. He had just graduated with a master's degree from Harvard. Paul waited until Peter could take a break, and they sat down for a visit.

Paul said, "What are you doing here?" Normally a Harvard master's will get you something better than the counter at McDonald's. Peter explained that four months after graduation, he still hadn't found a job, and he had bills to pay, so there he was, at least for the time being.

Paul started to say, "I'm sorry. That must be really hard," but Peter cut him off and said, "No. Don't be sorry. God has me here. This place is giving me awesome opportunities to share my faith. On my shift there's a Buddhist guy from Sri Lanka, a Muslim fellow from Lebanon, a Hindu lady from India, and a fellow Christian from El Salvador. It's awesome! I get to be a global missionary to my coworkers while asking 'Would you like fries with that?'"

They laughed, but the reality was, even though Peter never would have chosen McDonald's as a career path, his awareness of his calling to be a disciple shaped the way he looked at his circumstances and at the people around him.⁵ Who am I, and what am I doing where I am? Those are questions for disciples of Jesus.

Another question disciples ask is, "What is my call?" Every follower of Jesus has a call upon his or her life. How did Jesus call his first disciples? Did he call them to adopt a set of propositions of belief—a call to doctrine? No. Did he call them to a religious system? No. They were all Jews already. Did he call them to a vocation? No, they were already fishermen. Did he call them to advocate for a political cause, like the liberation of Israel from the Romans? Some people think politics is the most important thing. No, none

of these. What did Jesus call his disciples to do? Two words: “*Follow me.*”⁶ He simply invited his disciples to enter into a personal relationship with him. He called them to join the journey, to sign up for the adventure. He didn’t give them a plan or an agenda or a syllabus. He just invited them, in John’s words from last week, to “*come and see.*”⁷ Come and see what God had in store for them. It was like a leap of faith.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer was one of the great polymaths of the 20th century. I just learned that word this week; it means he was accomplished in several areas. A pastor’s son, he was a great organist, an amazing theologian and Biblical scholar, and a medical missionary doctor. He won the Nobel Peace Prize for establishing and running a hospital in Africa for most of his adult life.

Schweitzer’s most famous contribution to Christian scholarship was a book, *The Quest Of The Historical Jesus.*⁸ His conclusion was that the Jesus we think we know was so conditioned by the church and modern philosophy that the real Jesus is hardly recognizable. But if the layers are peeled back, there is an authentic Jesus who calls his followers into a personal and spiritual relationship. In what some have called the most famous words of 20th century theology, Schweitzer ended his book with this: “He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me’ and sets us to the task which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”⁹

The Jesus who calls us to a personal relationship also gives us a task. When we discover who Jesus is for us, he sets our life on a missionary course. When he called Andrew and Simon Peter, he said, “*Come, follow me, and I’ll show you how to fish for people.*”¹⁰ It’s kind of a cute play on words; after all, they were fishing for fish at the time. But the message is clear. The mission of Jesus will be focused on people—loving people, caring for people, guiding people toward the personal relationship with Jesus that he calls everyone to experience. The mission is consistent with the two things Jesus said were most important: to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.¹¹ The mission remained consistent until the last words Jesus spoke in the gospel of Matthew: “*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you.*”¹² Fishing for people; it’s what disciples do.

Martin Thielen, a retired United Methodist pastor, wrote a blog about a United Methodist Church in a small town in North Carolina that spearheaded a ministry for homeless people during the winter. There were 14 churches in their city, and each church agreed to take turns housing the homeless in their church for one week, providing food, shelter, transportation, etc., for 18-20 homeless folks.

The pastors from all the churches met in November to assign the weeks for the ministry. The Methodist preacher had a conflict, so she sent a lay person to the meeting, a woman who was very involved and enthusiastic. The pastor gave her some weeks after the holidays when she could sign up the Methodists to participate.

However, in the meeting of all the churches, they soon came to an impasse. Nobody wanted to take the week of Christmas. Everybody had Christmas services; their people

would have family activities; and everybody was just worn out at Christmas. Finally this lay woman had had all she could stand. She stood up and said too loudly to the preachers, “I can’t believe this! Jesus and his family were homeless in Bethlehem on the very first Christmas, and yet not one church in this community is willing to care for homeless people during the week of Christmas. Shame on you!”

The pastors felt ashamed all right—but not ashamed enough to volunteer for the week of Christmas. After a few awkward seconds, the woman said, “OK. My church, the First United Methodist Church, will take Christmas week, not only this year but every year!” One of the pastors quickly said, “So moved.” Another said, “I’ll second that.” The vote was unanimous.

After the meeting, the lay woman went to see her pastor, full of excitement. She said: “I have great news! Our church gets to care for homeless people during the week of Christmas, not only this year but every year! Isn’t that great?” Well, that didn’t sound like great news to the pastor. They had Christmas Eve services, too. How would they find volunteers to cook and care for homeless people during the holidays? That’s what she got for not going to the meeting herself.

The next Sunday the pastor gave the news to her congregation: “We are going to host homeless people during the week of Christmas, and we need a bunch of volunteers to help.” She didn’t think she would get any response, but people came out of the woodwork to volunteer. Families with young children volunteered, saying to the pastor, “We want our kids to know there is more to Christmas than getting presents.” Families who had lost loved ones during the year volunteered, hoping to fill the void of the Christmas season. The pastor almost received more volunteers than she could use. When Christmas week finally arrived, eighteen homeless people came to the Methodist church to spend the week. And much to this pastor’s surprise, it ended up being the highlight of the year for the church.

People brought in tons of food and clothes and Christmas gifts. But more than that, they stayed and ate with their guests and talked and played board games all week. The homeless people voluntarily came to the Christmas Eve candlelight service, and they were welcomed. Everyone had a holy moment together. It all ended up being a glorious experience for the church.

And so it continued to be for five more years. Then, when the sixth year came around, a strange thing happened. The week before the November meeting to plan the winter homeless ministry, the Methodist pastor got a phone call from the Baptist pastor. He said: “Everyone in town has heard how much your church enjoys hosting the homeless group at Christmas. So we wondered if you would you be willing to share that week with some of the other churches? We were hoping we could do Christmas week this year.”¹³

Here’s what I want you to remember today: Jesus calls ordinary people into a relationship and a mission. Churches everywhere, like our church, are in a season of getting the band back together. We have been through some tough years—a pandemic and a denominational divorce. It’s time to turn the corner. It’s time to reclaim our mission—why we’re here—and our vision—where we’re headed. Frankly, that’s why I believe it’s the right time for me to retire. It’s time for a new chapter, and you will be best served by new leadership.

Fort Smith Methodists have been in ministry for over 180 years. We’ve been through many chapters. We’ve faced many times of struggle. We were here when the Civil War

happened, the great flu pandemic and World War I, World War II, the upheaval of the 1960's. Through each time of challenge, we emerged into a new chapter of mission and ministry. I have every confidence that you will do so again in this season of ministry.

By the Sea of Galilee, Jesus called ordinary people to a personal relationship and a mission. He still does. How will you respond to his call?

¹ Dan Aykroyd and John Landis, *The Blues Brothers*, Universal Pictures, 1980.

² Mark 1:15.

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 28f.

⁴ Barclay, 27.

⁵ Paul Borthwick, *Great Commission, Great Compassion* (Westmont, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 46.

⁶ Mark 1:17.

⁷ John 1:39.

⁸ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest Of The Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001). Originally published in German in 1906. Many editions available.

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Schweitzer.

¹⁰ Mark 1:17.

¹¹ Mark 12:28-31.

¹² Matthew 28:19-20.

¹³ <https://doubtersparish.com/2021/12/01/christmas-at-first-church/>.