

Faithful Following

August 20, 2017

Esther 3; 1-6; 4:13-17

Rev. Jessica C. Gregory

Mason became a good friend. He and I were confirmation class volunteer leaders at Fourth Presbyterian Church in downtown Chicago. As we journeyed together with the class of ninth graders, sharing about our faith and our lives with each other, we built a strong connection. He and his partner invited me to a dinner party with other church friends and we all were blown away by their gracious hospitality and delicious food. Over all this time, Mason heard about my experiences teaching history and coaching cross-country at Gage Park High School on the south side of Chicago, and he heard about and walked alongside me as I discerned my call to attend seminary to become a pastor. Mason was an elder at Fourth and had a deep faith; he knew better than many what it meant to be a pastor, which is why I was surprised when he commented, "You are doing such important work in Chicago by being a teacher, do you really want to leave it and focus all of your energies on the church? The Chicago Public Schools need you more than the church." He went on to say that if I did end up in the church, he was sure I would serve it well, and he wished me the best. But honestly, I remember the comment about his wishing I didn't go to seminary a lot better than his affirmation of my pastoral call.

Member Jim Neal offers our Stump the Pastor question for this morning, which we just heard in Matthew: "Jesus told fishermen to stop fishing and follow him. How then can someone be an engineer, lawyer, or banker and still follow Jesus?" In the Gospel, the calls we read from Jesus are so often to his disciples, and the call is to follow him in his path of ministry. But is ministry the only, or most faithful, way to follow Jesus? My friend Mason clearly did not think so—but one could easily argue that teaching is also a ministry. But what about professions such as those in law or finance? The argument gets more difficult, but I believe there is one to make. Faithful following has much more to do with one's attitude than one's profession.

In fact, I think it would have been very possible for Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow Jesus by continuing their lives as fishermen. But that is not what Jesus had in mind, and he made that abundantly clear. While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw the two men dutifully casting their nets into the sea and hoping to catch fish. Jesus boldly interrupted their work by commanding: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." As a rabbi, this bold action was quite unusual, not to mention a social faux pas.

Rabbis didn't ask people to follow them; people sought these wise ones out and asked to follow them! But in order for people to seek out the rabbi, they had to get to know him a bit, which Jesus didn't have time for. His disciples could get to know him while they did ministry together, the ministry of fishing for people. That is an odd invitation, but perhaps more odd to us than it was to the fishermen. As New Testament Professor Emeritus from Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University Eugene Boring described: "The fishing image was used in a variety of ways in pagan and Jewish traditions, often in the deity's work....in calling people to a new life..."

(NIB, 169). In dramatic fashion, Jesus is calling the fishermen to a life of “professional” ministry yes, but he is also calling them to a new way of life in which grace and justice are found.

God’s calls to us come in many forms. Some hear from God directly, as Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John did so long ago. Some hear from God through participation in meaning-filled work that opens their eyes to who they are meant to be. And some hear from God through other people, as Queen Esther did. As Autumn shared with us in her introduction, the Book of Esther is faith-based work of historical fiction meant to convey the truth of God’s presence, calling, hope and deliverance in our lives.

While God is never mentioned in the brief book, God’s presence and God’s calling to Esther are obvious. God spoke through her cousin Mordecai so that Esther could hear what she had to do to save the Jews, her people. God has put her in the unique position of Queen “for just such a time as this.” Initially, Esther did not think she could do anything to help her people, because she could not talk to the King at that time. He was sequestered in the inner court of the palace, and the one law was that no one could go to him unless he gave them a golden scepter. If one entered without the golden scepter, they would be killed. Queen Esther was not to see him for 30 days, by which time all the Jews would be dead. But speaking with Mordecai, Esther began to think creatively about how she could see the king, and soon. I will let you read the book to find out how she did it but, in the end, she saw the king and convinced him to free the Jews. Queen Esther was following faithfully.

I recently read the book *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* by Bryan Stevenson. It’s a story of one who faithfully follows Jesus by bringing grace and justice to the courtroom. Stevenson attended law school at Harvard, during which time he did an internship in Alabama with lawyers defending death row inmates; advocating for their right to live sometimes until the minute of their death. As Bryan’s mentor told him when he first arrived, capital punishment is punishment for those who don’t have the capital to fight. This small group of dedicated litigators tried their best to change that. It was difficult, time consuming, and, at times, very discouraging work. But, it was work that made Bryan feel immediately energized by and passionate to continue. And so, after graduation, he went down to Alabama to continue in that work and to do more of it. He founded the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery.

When Bryan arrived at Harvard law he had no idea he’d end up in Montgomery, none at all. He wasn’t even sure he wanted to be a lawyer. But, as he writes in *Just Mercy*, it was the one graduate degree that only required a college degree. He thought he’d figure it out when he got there. At first he was lost in a sea of law theory and he could not understand how he would use what he was learning in a way that he could find meaningful. And then he took some social work classes and began to put together the dots. His summer internship in Alabama made it clear to Stevenson how he could use his law degree to change lives and, in doing so, change his own life and experience life abundantly.

There is very little mention of God in his book, but it is easy to recognize the ways he is faithfully following his call from God.

Stevenson's powerful story is but one illustration of a lawyer using his profession to bring about grace, justice and mercy in our world. There are examples of folks in finance and engineering also working hard for these things. So, it is possible to faithfully follow Jesus in these professions. But it is not always easy. Stevenson's story, like the disciples fishing, is dramatic. Life is not always so dramatic; as we all know, it is usually filled with routine tasks. Herein is the challenge for folks in many professions that don't have the goals of grace, justice, mercy and love. They must keep those goals *in their minds* even when it is absent from their work culture. That is difficult. It is so easy to get caught up in the number of billed hours, the amount of money made, and the constant client deadlines, that you forget your work *is* a ministry too. You needn't drop everything and begin life in a new direction to faithfully follow; you only need to practice kindness, offer grace and seek opportunities to be a friend to another.

Faithful following is being aware of God's *daily* calls on our lives—which come every hour and every day—to live life thinking beyond ourselves and showing the light of God. This is a calling given to all of us, as Christians; it is a calling that we must follow as Jesus followers. Whether we are sitting in a cubicle all day or are on our feet from morning 'til dark, we follow Jesus faithfully when we respond with optimism and gratitude rather than compliance and entitlement. We follow Jesus faithfully when we give back to our church and to our community in time and or in money so that we actually feel it, whether in our backs or our checkbooks. We follow Jesus when we listen for God and are willing to drop whatever we are doing—even if just for the day—to serve in a new and perhaps scary way.

As I reflect back on my conversation with Mason, I recognize God's voice there. Mason's suggestion that I stay in teaching made me think for a minute. Was I crazy for doing this seminary thing? It took me to a place of prayer and reflection that ultimately brought me to a place where I knew my pastoral journey was faithful following. I leave you with a question to ponder: Are you a faithful follower? The good news is, if you aren't, God has a wonderful adventure in store for you! Thanks be to God, Amen.

Work Cited

Boring, Eugene M. 1995. "Matthew" in the *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary VIII: New Testament articles: Matthew, Mark*. Abington Press 1995. Pp. 168-171.