

“Called to Follow”—Matthew 4:12-23

What does it mean for you and me to follow Jesus in a post-Christian, internet, unsettled world of terrorism and widening gaps of inequality? What does it look like for us—as educated, relatively wealthy people of privilege in a religiously pluralistic world, as members of a mainline Christian denomination, PCUSA, that is still 92% white? On a lighter note, how will Clemson fans continue to demonstrate grace, love, family humility as we celebrate the Dabo dynasty?

As a way of considering what it means to follow Jesus, some of us older folks remember the retro hymn “Jesus Calls Us O’er the Tumult”...it was in the previous maroon hymnal...

Jesus calls us: o’er the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea,
Day by day his sweet voice soundeth, saying, “Christian, follow me.”
Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world’s golden store,
From each idol that would keep us, saying “Christian, love me more.”
In our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease,
Still he calls, in care and pleasures, “Christian, love me more than these.”
Jesus calls us: by thy mercies, Savior, may we hear thy call,
Give our hearts to thine obedience, serve and love thee best of all.
As of old, Saint Andrew heard it by the Galilean lake,
Turned from home and toil and kindred, leaving all for his dear sake.”

The author, Cecil Francis Alexander—she wrote over 400 hymns, mostly for young children around mid-1800’s. While some of her images connect with us...life can be a wild, restless sea sometimes, and we all have our idols, and we are to serve and love Jesus best of all...still I find myself asking what does it mean, and look like, practically, for you and me to follow Jesus in present tense 2017. What does it mean for the PCUSA as a denomination? The encouraging news is for the first time we have co-moderators, both women, Denise Anderson and Jan Edminston, and J Herbert Nelson is our newly elected Stated Clerk.

In our gospel text, Matthew, quoting Isaiah, describes Zebulun and Naphtali as dark places where light dawns because of Jesus... then, before Jesus commands

fishermen Peter, Andrew, James, John to follow him and fish for people, he says they need to repent, turn, prepare him room. Jesus is not talking about confessing sins here but a change of mind, a reconfiguring of relationships, a rethinking of who they are. Then immediately these guys leave their job, family and go fishing with Jesus. Well, this makes for a nice bible story...but unfortunately Matthew doesn't connect the dots with the details and family dynamics. This raises lots of questions for me...

Did these fishermen know Jesus already? Like us, would they have had questions about salary, vacation, health insurance, pension, family leave? Were their families supportive? How long was their commitment? Was it more like a one year YAV (Young Adult Volunteer) position? Can you imagine the conversation around the dinner table? "Honey, we're going on the road with this guy Jesus and going fishing for people. Be in touch. Loveyoumeanit."

How do we bring the gospel content into our context? What does it mean for you and me to follow Jesus today? Do we simply assume that by showing up in worship and filling out a pledge card and being nice to our neighbors that we are following him? Is this a call story about vocation or our invitation to be evangelists and good news tellers or both?

What does it look like to follow Jesus? Seems to me God is calling us who label ourselves Christian to be a more intentional, prophetic, perhaps even radical commitment like the early disciples.

Maybe an image will help...imagine it's mid-June in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina—a warm but not one of those oppressive, humid summer evenings. You are sitting outside at your favorite Shem Creek restaurant sipping wine or drinking a cold one...watching a shrimp boat unload the day's catch. You see all kinds of creatures and stuff in the net...shrimp, crabs, starfish, golf balls, various types of fish, trash...you never know what the nets are going to catch.

In my younger days, especially in Corpus Christi, Texas, when I used to sit behind Farah Fawcett in middle school,...yes, that Farah, that was her real name...no, I did not fish for Farah but she did sign my annual.. I did some salt water fishing. Live

shrimp was the bait of choice and I remember dad and me getting into a school of speckled trout one early morning and then inviting all the neighbors over for a fish fry. We also did fresh water bass fishing with a plastic worm or attractive homemade spinner bait we called “the devil’s toothpick.” Catching a four pound largemouth can be a lot of fun!

Unlike shrimp boats casting a net, fishermen need the right bait. I doubt if our PCUSA propensity to restructure is attractive to a digital world. I wonder when was the last time you, as a Christian, intentionally had a conversation with a person who checks “none” on the religious preference survey. I appreciate the emphasis FHPC places on Christian Education and our PSA mission statement proclaims we are about making disciples of Jesus.

Seems to me the CHURCH doesn’t fish with the right bait. Instead of Jesus, we try to entice folks with programs, facilities and personalities. We don’t fish with Jesus’ gospel. Instead we cast our nets (or Internets) with varying degrees of social media competency but then quickly pull them back in lest we catch some people who are well, “different” from us. You never know what the nets are going to catch...Presbyterians, Catholics, Hispanics, African-American, Asian, people with different sexual orientation, folks who are just “scratch and sniff” church shoppers, people who like drums and big screens in worship, or listen to Hozier’s “Take Me To Church”, even a guilt-ridden Baptist every now and then.

The Jesus of the gospels who calls us to follow and fish has become domesticated, mainly Western, middle to upper class, smart, comfortable guy who helps poor people on mission trips instead of the short, Jewish, Palestinian, olive-skinned guy who upsets the religious establishment, breaks Sabbath laws, particularly identifies with folks on the margins, and baptizes with the fire-like Holy Spirit and transforms us from the inside out with our eyes of the heart enlightened.

It’s no accident that youth, young adults, even some boomers get their religion and God-talk at Faith-On-Tap or virtual churches or FCA or NewSpring or eclectic combinations of other religions or generic spirituality.

For most of us, and I include myself, being “Christian” is more an adjective than a noun. Following Jesus means being nice, paying your dues and serving on committees. We assume baptism, occasional pew sitting, and a few hours of confirmation certifies us to be card-carrying followers.

On the other hand, J. Herbert Nelson, our newly elected Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, said in a Facebook post December 23: “This is a significant time of the year to introduce someone to #jesuschrist again or for the first time. Who will you tell about his love while the story of our faith is so prominent in the public square during this time of the year? What testimony in your own life needs to be told as a moment of sharing the love of God that transforms, heals, and makes all things new. Tell it! Someone needs to hear some good news. Jesus Christ is the light of the world.”

While there is so much emphasis on “leadership” today, perhaps we need the balance of emphasis on following. Jesus’ call is so shockingly sudden and abrupt. We cannot take the time to develop the perfect strategic plan. Jesus did not say, “Guys, here are my long term objectives, take this to your stockholders annual meeting and let me know if you think our mission is doable.” Jesus’ call to follow is a Presbyterian polity trainwreck—it’s not done decently and in order—no time for prayer and discernment and committee meetings.

Let me close with a true story by Dr. Will Willimon, native of Greenville, recently retired Methodist Bishop, when he was Dean of the Duke University Chapel. When evangelical social activist, Dr. Tony Campolo, was to speak at our chapel, a young man appeared at my office and asked to introduce Dr. Campolo before he spoke. He told me that he would like to share something of what Dr. Campolo had meant to him.

“Such as?” I asked

“Such as when I worked for him last summer, in Philadelphia,” he replied.

I asked him to tell me about it

“I got converted my senior year of high school. I was a fresh, eager Christian so, when Dr. Campolo came to our town to speak, I went to hear him. He was great.

After he spoke, he asked us to sign up for his program of inner-city ministry in Philadelphia. So I did.

“Well, in mid-June, I met about a hundred other kids in a Baptist church in Philadelphia. We had about an hour of singing before Dr. Campolo arrived. When he got to the church, we were really worked up, all enthusiastic and ready to go. Dr. Campolo then preached for about an hour and, when he finished, people were shouting, standing on the pews and clapping. It was great.

“Ok gang, are you ready to go out there and tell ‘em about Jesus?” he asked. “Yeah, let’s go,” we shouted back.

“Get on the bus!” Tony shouted. So we spilled out of the church and on to the bus. We were singing, clapping. But then we began to drive deeper into the depths of the city. We weren’t in a great neighborhood when we started riding, but it got worse. Gradually, we stopped singing and everybody, all of us college kids, were just staring out the windows. We were scared.

“Then the bus pulled up before one of the worst looking housing projects in Philadelphia. Tony jumped on our bus, opened the door and said, ‘Alright gang, get out there and tell ‘em about Jesus. I’ll be back at five o’clock.’

“We made our hesitant way off the bus. Stood there on the corner and had prayer, then we spread out. I walked down the sidewalk and stopped before a huge tenement house. I gulped, said a prayer, and ventured inside. There was a terrible odor. Windows were out. No lights in the hall. I walked up one flight of stairs toward the door where I heard a baby crying. I knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” said a loud voice inside. Then the door was cracked open and a woman, a woman holding a baby, peered out at me. ‘What you want?’ she asked in a harsh, mean voice.

“I told her that I wanted to tell her about Jesus.”

“With that, she swung the door open and began cursing me. She cursed me all the way down the hall, down the flight of steps, out to the sidewalk.”

“I felt terrible.” “Look at me,” I said to myself. “Some Mr. Christian I am. How in the world could somebody like me think that I could tell about Jesus?”

“I sat down on the curb and cried. Then I looked up and noticed a store on the corner,, windows all boarded up, bars over the door. I went to the store, walked in, looked around. Then I remembered. The baby had no diapers. The mother was smoking. I bought a box of paper diapers and a pack of cigarettes.”

“I walked back to the tenement house, said a prayer, walked in, walked up the flight of stairs, gulped, stood before the door and knocked.”

“Who is it?” said the voice inside. When she opened the door I slid that box of diapers and those cigarettes in. She looked at them, looked at me, and said, “Come in.”

I stepped in the dingy apartment

“Sit down,” she commanded.

I sat down on the old sofa and began to play with the baby. I put a diaper on the baby, even though I had never put one on before. When the woman offered me a cigarette, even though I don’t smoke, I smoked. I stayed there all afternoon, talking, playing with the baby, listening to the woman.

About four o’clock, the woman looked at me and said, “Let me ask you something. What’s a nice college boy like you doing in a place like this?”

So I told her everything I knew about Jesus. It took me about five minutes. Then she said, “Pray for me and my baby that we can make it out of here alive.”

And I prayed.

That evening, after we were all back on the bus, Tony asked, “Well gang, did any of you get to tell ‘em about Jesus?” And I said, “I not only got to tell’em about Jesus, I met Jesus. I went out to save somebody, and I ended up getting saved. I became a disciple.”

I wonder how Jesus is calling me, you, PSA, Fort Hill, PCUSA to follow him in a world of Aleppo and a new President? I pray we will be good fisherpeople.