

What are we supposed to do with this story? I'm sure a lot of sermons have been preached about how we, too, should leave everything behind to follow Jesus. But very few people do that, and I don't think that represents a moral failing. To put the question in modern terms, what percentage of people literally give up everything to leave their communities of origin to follow a religious vocation? Far, far less than 1%. I could only find numbers for the Roman Catholics, and for them, only about 5 or 6 out of every 10,000 people are members of religious communities under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. And they joined their communities after going through lengthy formal discernment processes with them, not making a decision on the spot, unilaterally, after being invited directly by Jesus.

The story might not even be a story at all, in the sense that some scholars think it's better taken as a summary of Jesus's efforts at building his core team. But that doesn't mean it doesn't have anything to teach us. All of Scripture is economical with language, and St. Mark is notably terse; he mentions John the Baptist's arrest, an event of great importance for multiple reasons, only in passing, though he does return to John later on. So, if Mark talks about something for a few verses, there's a good reason.

To elaborate on terseness, Mark tells us absolutely nothing about why those disciples chose to drop everything and follow Jesus. Some sermons on this passage may claim they had no idea what they were getting themselves into, but it begins by saying that Jesus had been preaching in the area. Maybe they had heard Jesus, or heard about him. Both Jesus's ministry and fishing are dangerous; maybe they were adrenaline junkies, looking for something even more dangerous than fishing. They certainly found it. John's arrest not only foreshadowed his and Jesus's executions, but also the fate of the disciples themselves.

But in a way, the reason why they followed Jesus doesn't matter; what they understood doesn't matter; what matters most is *that* they followed him. If they had understood Jesus's preaching and had feelings about it, but not followed him, *they* would not have mattered. Their names would be lost to history, rather than venerated. If this story is a summary, then maybe Jesus invited many others to follow him, but only a few did, and theirs are the names we remember. That would explain why Jesus said, "Many are called, but few are chosen."

We like to think of Jesus as successful 100% of the time, and we might even have been taught that everyone he called followed him. But that ignores the stories of people who refused to follow Jesus, not to mention the religious authorities' plot against him, and the dramatic rejection of the people on Good Friday.

But none of those stories mean Jesus wasn't charismatic or that his message wasn't compelling. Being a fisherman was a good gig, and being the sons of someone who owns a fishing business was even better. You didn't leave your family, which was your only support system, without a good reason, and you certainly didn't give up the opportunity to inherit a business without a very compelling reason indeed.

So in a very short passage, before we're even told much about them, we see that Jesus, his ministry, and his mission are very compelling. Decades later, St. Paul was telling people that Jesus, his ministry, and his mission were more important than family, property, business, and even their own most intense emotional experiences. Paul won followers to Jesus not by making discipleship seem easy, convenient, and familiar, but by calling people to a radically different way of life.

Now the purpose of the call story begins to come into focus. We need this story because we seem to have lost that sense of urgency and intense focus today. Jesus, his ministry, and his mission haven't changed. Neither has human nature. Yet more and more people are determined to find the things that only Jesus can provide... anywhere but Jesus. I think that responding to this phenomenon is the Church's great challenge in our time. But we're going to explore this phenomenon in depth during our Lenten study.

For now, I want to focus on one aspect of the call story that is universal. While Jesus doesn't call everyone in the same literal, direct way he called Peter, Andrew, James, and John, and very rarely calls people to give up their families, their careers, and everything else, Jesus does call everyone to follow him in one way or another, and following Jesus means leaving other things behind.

This sounds like a sacrifice, and sometimes Jesus does call us to make sacrifices, but some of the things we can't take with us are things that we don't want, or are harmful to us. Things like fear, self-righteousness, anger, greed, grudges, and all manner of selfishness. Things that promise fulfillment, but in truth only make endless demands upon us, demands we can never satisfy, made by things that can never satisfy us.

This may sound like a somewhat self-indulgent self-help project, but make no mistake, some of these things can eat away at us like a cancer, and if so, being rid of them is an urgent matter. On a larger scale, the Church's mission to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ is urgent. That sounds abstract, but when you think about all the harm people do to each other because they are not united with God and each other, you recognize the situation is urgent indeed.

We tend to focus on this aspect of our faith in Lent, but it's true all the time, so there's never a bad time to reflect on the things that keep us from the richest, most fulfilling relationship with Jesus we could have. There's never a bad time to thank him for liberating us from some already, and there's never a bad time to seek out others that might still be holding us back. Better yet, we have great advantages over the disciples. We have their prayers and witness, and we know enough to ask for help. In order to help us follow him more faithfully, Jesus is ready to help us lay down our burdens, if we are only willing to let them go.