

FOLLOWING
Matthew 4:12-23

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You can find a Bible verse to justify just about any opinion or action - the Bible does not speak in one voice; it includes a lot of contradictions. Likewise, you can find a statistic to support just about any thesis. Who you trust depends on whom you have chosen to follow.

There are various opinions about which statistic is most correct, but here's a trend that is **not** being disputed - American workers, especially those under 50, are quitting their jobs in record numbers. The reasons vary, but most of them want more flexibility and a healthier work environment.

These workers had been feeling a growing sense of dissatisfaction before the pandemic and the pandemic caused them to reach the tipping point.

Restaurant workers didn't feel safe. Those afforded the ability to work from home didn't want to return to the regular office schedule after the lockdown. Others simply realized, "Life is short and life is fragile; I won't be miserable at work anymore."

They suddenly saw different opportunities.

I wonder if it might be the case that Simon and Andrew and James and John, four of the fishermen in our gospel reading, had been feeling a growing sense of dissatisfaction with their lives and livelihoods. Sometimes we feel things a long time before we act on those feelings. We may or may not share what we're thinking and feeling with others. Sometimes it takes a while for us to be in touch with our own

feelings and acknowledge them. “I’m bored, I’m restless, I’m lonely, I can’t keep doing this anymore, I’m tired of juggling. I’m close to burnout.”

Could it be that one or two of these brothers had started to be aware that he just couldn’t imagine having nothing new in his life? “I love fishing, I love being out in the fresh air, but there’s got to be more to life than this.”

Now I’m not saying that Jesus wasn’t charismatic. I know that he was compelling. None of these fishermen would have left their boats and families if there wasn’t something authentic about Jesus’ invitation. And we have four gospels full of other examples of the pull Jesus had on people.

But still, isn’t it interesting to consider that often our response to an invitation comes from a place of dissatisfaction? If we aren’t at least slightly unhappy with our lives as they are, why would we even listen to the voice that calls us towards something new?

There is a message, sometimes subtle, sometimes unavoidably direct, that comes to us from various voices in our culture. From advertising, from social media, from celebrities and self-help gurus. That message goes like this: “If you look a certain way, you’ll be happy. If your family photos look good on Instagram, you’ll be happy. If you have this income, this kind of car, this kind of vacation, you’ll be happy. If you turn off the news, and focus only on your self-care, you’ll be happy.”

It’s hard not to be lured by one or another of these pervasive messages. The tragic reality is that it’s not working. Those promises are not true. Those messages cannot be trusted. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you how many people in our circles of family and friends are unhappy. As a whole we’re numbing ourselves and distracting

ourselves and self-medicating. We continue to follow people called Influencers on social media but do we question what kind of influence they're having on us?

Last week the Washington Post printed the results of a survey that all of my clergy friends are talking about. I know what I said a few minutes ago - you can believe what you want about statistics - but this comes from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, reporting that the most meaningful, happiest and least stressful place on earth to be is in church — or another religious community. People ranked “participating in religious and spiritual activities” slightly ahead of sports, exercise and recreation - and the difference is meaning.

We are wired for meaning. It's one thing that separates us from all other species. All people strongly desire for their lives to count for something.

It's obvious why I want to share these particular statistics. You might say it's self-serving. But it's also deeply connected to our Christian values. Jesus says, “I came that you may have life, and have it more abundantly.” We are not here to merely endure or survive; we are here to thrive. Thriving describes a life of joy, meaning and purpose.

It wasn't an easy life to which Jesus called the four fishermen. They had to leave everything they knew behind. Anytime Jesus faced opposition, they did as well. If Jesus' life was in danger, so was theirs. They didn't even understand what Jesus was talking about some of the time. But it WAS a meaningful life. Jesus offered them a relationship with him and with the one he called “Father.” Jesus saw them as they were, accepted them, and then encouraged them to be the people they were created to be. Following Jesus makes for a challenging life; it challenges us to be so accepting of

ourselves that we can grow, that we can transform. We don't have to cling to our old identities. Jesus offered the disciples relationships with each other, a community where they belonged, where they shared a common vision, a common purpose, common values.

My hunch is that each one of you is here because you have heard Jesus' invitation in your life. Maybe it came, as it came to me, in your youth. Maybe it came at church camp. Maybe it came through a song, a piece of music. Maybe you heard it when you were in nature. Perhaps you've always heard it, because it was spoken through the words of a beloved parent or grandparent. Maybe you gravitated towards it because you saw someone whose life seemed different. Maybe you know someone whose love for God, whose love for the way of life Jesus embodied gave them a sense of peace - and you want that for yourself. There are a thousand ways we can hear the invitation.

Or maybe you're here because you **want** to hear the invitation. You've begun to listen to yourself, and you know that the way of life offered out there just doesn't feel like enough anymore. Something is missing.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus calls people right where they are? He doesn't ask for resumes or references or even a lifetime commitment. Just, simply, "Follow me." He calls ordinary people. He didn't go to the temple to find the most religious person, nor did he search out the richest person in town, or the most politically-connected. Ordinary people, to whom he offered an extraordinary way of life.

Neither does Jesus ask his followers to recite a statement of faith. For many people, following or belonging happens long before believing. For many people, faith

begins not with a set of beliefs to adhere to or a creed to ascribe to but with a voice or something internal in our souls that calls to us and says, "Follow me." It's sometimes a whisper and sometimes a nudge. Sometimes it's an attraction to others whose lives seem more centered, more at peace, more joy-filled.

The writer Brian McLaren puts it this way: "For centuries, Christianity has been presented as a system of beliefs. What would it mean for Christians to rediscover their faith not as a problematic system of beliefs, but as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion, that makes mistakes and is dedicated to beloved community for all? Could Christians migrate from defining their faith as a system of beliefs to expressing it as a loving way of life?"

When we follow Jesus, we discover that we can live the Jesus way of life right where we are. Following Jesus doesn't have to mean a change of geography or vocation. But it does transform the way we live. We become different employers and employees. Different spouses and partners. Different citizens. Different parents and children and friends.

Perhaps what Jesus is saying to us sounds something like this:

*Follow me – on a cold morning in January, when the warmth of a cozy bed is even more alluring on a Sunday morning, into a time of worship, prayer, and study with a community of faith.

Follow me - when you see that coworker, classmate, or neighbor who seems to not have anyone to talk to, who is longing for someone to hear his or her story and offer support.

Follow me – at a dinner party where jokes become increasingly crude, and you can't quite bring yourself to laugh at yet another joke that brims with racism or sexism or homophobia. Follow me – to speak out for what is right.

Follow me – when you see those who are hungry, or without shelter, or who lack decent clothing, or who are oppressed and without voice.

Follow me - bravely stepping out of your comfortable boat - even when you're not quite sure where the Jesus way will take you.”

We have all kinds of options about whom to follow. Choosing whom we will follow is a decision that determines the kind of life we will live, the kind of satisfaction we will find. It's a choice that makes all the difference.

I'll close with a prayer written by the Catholic writer and monk Thomas Merton

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself,

and the fact that I think I am following your will

does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you

does, in fact, please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore, I will trust you always
though I may seem to be lost, and in the shadow of death
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Amen.

*The "Follow me" lines are quoted from a sermon by the Rev. Elizabeth Lovell Milford.