

CALLED

Called to Be Followers of Jesus Matthew 4:18-22

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The air was hot and filled with unfamiliar sounds and smells. I was with a tour group in Havana, Cuba, and we had just walked into a beautiful city square. All around the square were vendors calling out to us, inviting us to see what they had to sell – shoes and leather goods, fresh produce, hand-carved chess sets, and so much more. It was a little overwhelming. But one voice caught my attention, “Señor, you want cigars?” The answer, of course, was YES! My grandfather was born in Cuba, which is my rationale for why I like a good Cuban cigar. When the man noticed that he had my attention he said, “Follow me.”

I assumed that he, like the other vendors, had a stall in the square. But I was wrong. He led me down the street, and then we turned down an alley. If I’d had any brains in my head I would have turned around at that point and returned to my tour group. But I didn’t. I continued to follow the man down yet another street and then up three flights of stairs and into an apartment. I remember thinking to myself, “I’m either going to die or I’m going to have a great story to tell and maybe a few good cigars.”

He led me into a room with boxes and boxes of some of the best Cuban cigars in the world, but I didn’t want a whole box. I only wanted a few. So, the man led me back down the stairs and through a few more streets and into yet another apartment, where he sold me a few of my favorites at a very reasonable price. Then he walked me back to the square, shook my hand, thanked me and walked away. Happy with my purchase, I went in search of my tour group, but I couldn’t find them. Anywhere. And just about the time I started to feel a bit of panic arise in me, I heard a familiar voice call to me, “Señor, did you lose your group?” It was my cigar-selling friend. When I nodded he once again said, “Follow me.” Within 10 minutes he located my group. Once again, he shook my hand and this time I thanked him.

Following that man wasn’t the smartest thing I’ve ever done. I’m lucky the story had a happy ending. But there is another who has called to me and said, “Follow me,” and following him has definitely been the smartest thing I’ve ever done. Let’s meet him in our scripture reading today from Matthew 4:18-22 [NLT].

We’re in a worship series entitled, “Called.” We’re exploring the many ways in which God calls us throughout our lives. We’re discovering how the puzzle piece of our lives fits into the bigger picture of God’s work in the world. While I believe that God has called each of us in many different ways and to many different things, today we’re talking about one calling that we’ve all been given – the call to follow Jesus. Or, put another way, the call to discipleship.

Let’s begin by understanding what a disciple is. In the ancient world, the very best and brightest students would choose a rabbi to follow. They would attach themselves to that rabbi, traveling with the rabbi, learning what the rabbi knew. A rabbi’s student was called a disciple, a learner. And it wasn’t uncommon for disciples to follow a rabbi for awhile, and then move on to perhaps follow a different rabbi for a time.

But being a disciple of Jesus was and is significantly different. The first disciples didn’t choose Jesus; Jesus chose them. And those disciples were not the brightest and best. They were common fishermen and tax-collectors. And those same things are true of us. Jesus chose us and called us; we didn’t choose and call him. And I can’t speak for you, but I know I’m not among the brightest and the best. I know the truth about myself. But Jesus called me anyway. That’s amazing! The call to follow Jesus is a gift of grace.

But before we get too soft and fuzzy about this call to discipleship, let’s be clear: when Jesus calls disciples he doesn’t ask for a shallow, short-term, half-hearted commitment. Following Jesus is a commitment of our whole life. St. Paul understood that reality. That’s why Paul called himself a “slave to Christ” or a “bond servant” of Christ. It’s a powerful and beautiful concept. You see, in the ancient world if you fell into debt you could be sold as a slave, and you worked as a slave until your debt was paid. But there’s this provision in the Old Testament that says that if a servant loved his or her master because the master had been so good and kind, they could declare

themselves a bond servant, bound by love in service to the master for life. That's Paul's vision of what it is to be a disciple, a slave to Christ, bound by love to serve Jesus for life.

Why would anyone do such a thing? Why would anyone answer Jesus' call, "Come follow me" so completely? I know that for some people the answer is "to get into heaven and stay out of hell." But that's never been my answer. Let me tell you why I answered Jesus' call, "Follow me" when I was in college, and why I count myself a bond servant to Christ today.

Put most simply, I follow Jesus because I see in Jesus the life I want, and I trust that as I follow him, Jesus will shape my life to be like his. Let me say that again. I follow Jesus because I see in Jesus the life I want, the life I long for. And I trust that as I follow him, Jesus will shape my life to be like his.

When I look at Jesus through the lens of Scripture, I see a man so fully alive, so fully aware of his connection with God. And Jesus was so rooted in that loving relationship with God that it shone from him like a light, which is why when the biblical writers reflected on Jesus' life they said, "The fullness of God was pleased to dwell in him." Jesus was full to overflowing with the life of God and I want that to be true in my life. I want to be fully alive.

When I look at Jesus through the lens of Scripture, I see a man who loved wastefully. In other words, I see in Jesus a man so full of the infinite love of God that he could afford to pour it out on everyone, especially those who couldn't possibly benefit him in any way. And he didn't do it grudgingly, he did it joyfully. Jesus was like a man with an endless supply of money who walked through this world handing out \$100 bills to everyone, totally unconcerned with what they did with it, totally unconcerned with whether they deserved it or would ever thank him for it. Jesus loved others completely, wastefully. Even me. And I want to love like that.

I want to live fully and love wastefully, but I know that I can't do that on my own. And so when Jesus calls, "Follow me," I go. I choose to serve Jesus, bound by love, in the hope that Jesus will shape my heart, my mind, my life to be like his.

Being a disciple, following Jesus, isn't about church membership or the details of our doctrinal beliefs. It isn't about trying harder to be good, or jumping hoops to get into heaven. The call to follow Jesus is an

invitation to live fully and love wastefully along your journey of life, no matter where you are or what you're doing – as a student, a brother or sister, an employee, a parent or grandparent, a neighbor, a volunteer. Being a disciple, following Jesus, isn't a destination, it's the way we walk the journey – so full of God that God shines through us. So full of love that love pours out of us.

Among all the voices in that city square in Havana I heard one voice, and I followed it because he offered me something I thought I wanted. Not so sure I'd do that again!

And among all the voices in this world offering all sorts of things we think we want or need, there is one voice calling "Follow me." And that voice is worth following because he offers what we truly need: fullness of life, an abundance of love.

You've been called in baptism. Today maybe you've heard the call. I invite you to pray in your seat or come to the altar railing. Rather than my praying for you, I want to invite you to pray.