

SERMON: Leaving and Following
TEXT: Mark 1:14-20

1-24-21

For as many years as I have been in ministry, there has been a high rate of burnout among ministers. This truth is supported by scientific studies, statistics, the testimony of friends and colleagues, and my own experiences of being on the edge of burnout myself. I don't share this to get your sympathy, but to give some background on my opening illustration.

I've learned that the best way to avoid burnout is self-care: establishing good boundaries, taking allotted vacation time and study leave, healthy habits, and enrolling in educational opportunities that help me learn and practice self-care. In one seminar a few years ago, the leader began by giving every person a paper plate. For a moment I wondered if we were about to do a kindergarten craft project.

The plate represented time and was to be divided into sections like a pie chart. The sections were to be labeled according to the amount of time you spend on important aspects of life. Work. Family. Significant others. Recreation. Hobbies. Sleep. It seemed like a simplistic exercise, and I approached it half-heartedly. But when I saw the finished product, it struck me as rather jarring and profound. The largest areas illustrating where most of my time was spent were not surprising. But

the tiny slivers of pie illustrating time spent on hobbies and relationships awakened me to my unbalanced life.

Beyond this reality check was a discussion of how to make changes. If you wanted or needed to make one piece of the pie larger, you had to make another piece smaller. We all have only one plate or one pie to work with. We only have 100%. So we have to subtract before we can add. It's the same idea as the advice about getting rid of one item of clothing for every new item you buy. But it's never as easy as it sounds, whether you're working on your wardrobe or on time management.

“As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea - for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, *Follow me and I will make you fish for people.* And immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

Immediately. No questions asked. No hesitation. No “let me think about it” or even “let me pray about it.” Simon and Andrew didn't whisper to one another or ask what the other was thinking. There was no agreement, “I'll go if you go.” They

didn't even take time to clean the nets or put them away. "Immediately they left their nets and followed him."

"As [Jesus] went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him."

Immediately. They left their father. No goodbyes. No explanations. No "I feel like I have to do this." No "please give mother a hug for me." No time to discuss how they would support themselves or when they would return.

Simon and Andrew, James and John all left something behind in order to follow Jesus. In fact, they left everything behind, to follow a man they barely knew. To go they knew not where. To do whatever he might ask them to do.

I'm a planner. I'd like to think that Mark's use of the word "immediately" is exaggerated. I'd like to think there was a little time to get some questions answered. To say their goodbyes. To tie up some loose ends. I'm not comfortable

making a move if I'm not ready. But it's not always comfortable following Jesus, is it?

One theologian pointed out that “this is not the end of the story. This is just the beginning of *the beginning* (v. 1). Ahead for them and for us, there is much to learn, much stumbling, misunderstanding, and backsliding. Becoming a faithful Christian disciple takes both a moment and a lifetime.... Christianity is always both for now and for the long haul....” (Elton W. Brown, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1)

And I would add, becoming faithful Christian disciples is a decision we make moment by moment, over and over again. Becoming faithful Christian disciples takes both LEAVING AND FOLLOWING. But, going back to my paper plate illustration, it's more than a matter of taking something off your plate so that there's room to add a new thing. Following Christ is like setting your old plate aside and starting over with a whole new plate.

Another example might be that of recovering from an addiction. Standard advice given to someone who is trying to stop drinking, for example, is that you can't expect to go on living the same life, just without alcohol. The addict is also encouraged to find new friends, new places to hang out, and new recreational

activities in order to be successful in recovery. The excessive drinking is only part of a whole lifestyle that supports the habit. You have to leave that life to follow and embrace a new life.

“In calling Galilean fishermen to discipleship,” wrote one Biblical scholar, “Jesus does not ask them to add one more task to their busy lives. He calls them into new ways of being. When Simon and Andrew leave their nets, they leave a way of life. This is even clearer with James and John, who leave not only their nets but also their father. These disciples leave behind a whole matrix of work, family, and place - all the stuff of a new identity.” (Ted A. Smith, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1)

This scholar takes the new identity idea one step further, saying that even Jesus’ words, “I will make you fish for people” is really a call to a new identity rather than just a task. “There is a world of difference between *I will make you fish* - [which] gives us one more activity to work into our date books - and *I will make you to become fishers* - [which] promises a whole new life.” (Ted A. Smith, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1)

Now, I think it needs to be said that just because you leave your home or your way of life does not necessarily mean that you don’t love it or value it as you

once did. Imagine that you are a young person who has discovered a love for the sea. After a good deal of research and study, you determine that you are being called to be a marine biologist. But you were born and raised in southeast Missouri. As much as you love your home and your family, you will need to leave in order to follow your dream.

And leaving is never easy. Even if you're leaving a bad situation, leaving requires energy and risk and hard work emotionally, physically, financially, mentally, and spiritually.

Too easily we rush past the first five words of this passage from Mark. "Now after John was arrested." It seems like an extraneous detail. Other than the proclamation of the good news of God and the call from Jesus to repent, nothing about the remaining verses has anything to do with John the Baptist.

But there's a hint in those five words. Even a foreshadowing of things to come. "Now after John was arrested." Not only was he arrested, John was later executed. Beheaded. It cost John his life to proclaim Jesus and to follow him. Just as leaving is never easy, neither is following.

There is always risk in following. There is always sacrifice in following.
There is always cost in following.

Of course, there is also great reward in following. So much greater than the cost. There is immeasurable reward. There is eternal reward.

Jesus calls us to leave whatever is holding us back. Whatever keeps us from him. To follow him. Wholeheartedly, and without hesitation. Jesus calls us to follow moment by moment, with every decision we make, with every step we take, with every word we speak. Jesus calls us to follow for a lifetime. To take on a new identity. Not just to do the task of following but to *become* followers. May we do it despite the cost. Without thought of reward. May we do it to the glory of God!

AMEN.