

Epiphany 2 Year A
John 1:29-42
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Because we are so influenced by Mark, Matthew and Luke, when we think about the call of the first disciples we imagine a scene by the Sea of Galilee, a call that comes quite suddenly, without any preparation at all, and two pairs of fishermen, first Simon and Andrew, and then James and John, precipitously leaving their nets and following Jesus in response to that call. None of that happens today. The scene is Bethany, not Galilee, and the central figure in this call is John the Baptist – who was already in prison when Jesus began assembling his disciples in Mark’s gospel – and not Jesus. First he sees Jesus and declares him “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” and follows that by saying: “This is he of whom I said ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’” Then he instructs Andrew to follow Jesus, not him as a disciple. Andrew then finds his brother Simon, soon to be named Peter, who also becomes a disciple.

I have no need to try and reconcile these marked differences between the narratives, because I think they emerge from different theological agendas, not historical memories. John the Evangelist was concerned to identify John the Baptist as someone who knew he was a precursor to the Messiah, not the Messiah himself, and each of the other evangelists, in their own ways, did the

same thing, though far less dramatically than we see here today. What interests me just now in this passage, in a way as a matter of fact that I have never been interested before, is what it says about the nature of discipleship, and so I want to focus today on Andrew, in order to see what we might learn from him.

Whether or not the historical Andrew was actually a disciple of John is unknown, there is no other mention of this possibility anywhere in the tradition. But this story says he was, and this is the story we are dealing with. And therefore in the terms of the story Andrew had to give up following one path in order to follow another. He had to abandon one very deep and important devotion in order to develop another. He had to give up one master in order to serve another. That is something that happens all the time.

At one time or another as we grow we all become devoted to something. Maybe it is something that we believe will make us happy, and maybe it is something we believe will lead us to the “real truth,” or maybe it is a cause that we believe will truly transform this world into something better. But consider your own experience and you will discover that you are indeed a disciple of something. Sometimes as we grow we discover that the very thing, the very truth, the very cause, we had become devoted to is not ultimate, does not in the end bring about that which we believed it would, and so we must move on to something more, something higher, and that means giving up what we have previously believed to be very important for the sake of that which is even more so. That can be difficult, and often is.

We are gathered here on the weekend of the Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday, so let me give you what might seem like an odd example from that era of the struggle for human rights. For much of his life George Wallace was deeply dedicated to the cause of segregation. He was a disciple of this cause not simply as a function of his politics as a southern governor, but also because of his faith as a Christian. He really did believe that God ordered human relationships in this manner. Over time, and under the gradually increasing influence of people like Dr. King, Wallace began to change, and by the end of his life he had abandoned that faith, abandoned that belief, that cause, in favor of a new kind of discipleship, the discipleship of true human equality under God. It is one of the more remarkable transformations in our history. I don't know how complete it was, but that it happened at all indicates a profound movement in the soul of that man, and an illustration of what happens when one abandons one sort of discipleship for another.

In my own case I have gone through several stages in my faith that constitute different kinds of discipleship, two of which I describe here. At one point in my life I was a disciple of the strongly ascetic Jesus who had only one thing to say: "deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow." This was, to my mind, the only authentic way to be Christian, and since I was not prepared to do that as fully as Jesus had I found myself to be a most unworthy disciple. There is much truth in this; we are for the most part unworthy disciples, and our faith in all sorts of junk that we wrongly imagine will make us happy, safe, or important

is really quite bad for us. But over time I came to realize that as important as this insight was to me, and as devoted as I was to it in spite of the pain it caused, there was yet a higher master to follow, the Jesus who also spoke of this very strange unconditioned forgiveness, the Jesus who likened grace to the rain or the sun which falls on everyone equally without regard to who deserves it and who doesn't. And so I had to leave the one Jesus for the sake of the other; I had to give up the sense of moral purity that comes with a single minded obsession, and enter that ambiguous realm of fallen and broken people this different and more powerful Jesus led me into.

When I was in Bend I knew a person who went from being a non-Christian eight years ago to being a first year seminarian studying for ordination to the priesthood today. She spent about five of those eight years being like Andrew, moving, slowly in her case, from one kind of discipleship to another. I don't know how she would describe this process, but from where I stood it seemed to me that it was confusing and costly for her, as she discovered that moving into discipleship of Christ was not only possible but necessary if she was going to become the person she truly believed she was meant to be. Because of this, all that confusion and cost was, and continues to be, worth it to her.

If you take a moment to consider your own lives, your experience and development, I believe you will all discover similar experiences. You will find moments, and even whole eras in your lives when you discovered that the kind of devotion you had previously believed to be crucial to who you were as a

person was no longer sufficient to hold your experience, and so you moved from being the disciple of one master to being the disciple of another. Sometimes that movement is pretty easy, reflecting no more than a change of heart or perspective that comes quite naturally with increasing maturity. Sometimes it is quite difficult, because it means that you have given up something you really believed crucial for a long period of time, and therefore part of the change is acknowledgment of a real loss.

But either way we all spend a certain amount of time being like Andrew as he is depicted in today's story from John's Gospel, for this is part of life. We all move from one sort of discipleship to another, and the only question is not whether that happens, but whether or not we notice it, reflect on it, and allow ourselves to experience the fullness of it. Indeed, I would say that part of spiritual growth is just this struggle with the call to let go of some things as the moment begins to demand it in order to embrace something higher and better. Part of it is of course the complex process of growing and maturing, but there is more to it than that because fully mature people find themselves involved in this whole movement as well. Regardless of its source, this is a movement of the spirit that we need neither deny nor fear, even when it becomes hard, but may instead embrace as a necessary aspect of the life we are called to lead in response to what God has done in Christ.

When Andrew did leave John's group and become a disciple of Jesus he discovered something he couldn't have anticipated, that he was now in the

presence of the Messiah. That too is part of the promise of this passage. As we discover within ourselves the grace to leave the lesser masters we know and trust for the sake of the greater master we know not yet, and will perhaps never fully understand, we will have the same experience. Sooner or later we will find what Andrew did, that we have met the true Messiah, and there, in that one final calling, we will find our true purpose and our true rest.