**A Radical Invitation**

**Mark 1:14-20**

**Bishop Larry M. Goodpaster**

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Risen Christ, who continues to walk beside the seas and who continues to call us to walk as disciples of The Way.

I can only imagine what the conversation with his wife was like when Zebedee arrived at home that evening. How do you explain that your two sons just walked off the job and went off with this itinerant rabbi from Nazareth? After all, everyone knows that nothing good comes out of that little village in the hills. On his way home, Zebedee was probably also thinking about how his small fishing business was going to survive, and about the neighbors would say, and about what he had done wrong as a parent that both sons would leave at the sound of a voice, leaving him holding the nets.

When Jesus shows up, people respond in a variety of ways; some drop everything and walk off after him. Others scratch their heads in wonder and amazement that anyone could be as gullible as that! ***“Follow me.”*** Some decide to study it for four years before drafting a proposed legislative response to the call. ***“Follow me.”*** It is an invitation so radical that it brings with it a fundamental transformation of life and of work, of present and future.

Because of our commitment to Jesus, and because of our baptism and church membership we have gathered in Tampa from many countries around the world. There is nothing quite like this moment in our United Methodist story. Just look around. What a glorious sight, as believers sit together. Right now we are all filled with energy and excitement and hope and anticipation. And right now we pray that we will be able to sustain those feelings over the next ten days.

Like the first four by the Sea of Galilee, we now gather beside Tampa Bay to clean and mend our nets. This is our business, because once every four years we have this need to get together to amend and fix the nets we know as United Methodism. But, will we be able to hear this invitational call of Jesus in the midst of all the legislation that will crowd upon our time and drain our energy? Will we be able to entrust ourselves to the Jesus-vision and not be distracted by the tyranny of the clock, the limits of the agenda, or the clamor of other voices? Will we become so wrapped up in business as usual, tending *our* nets that we do not recognize or hear Jesus as he walks among us?

Peter, Andrew, James, and John were willing to set aside programmed schedules and future plans because that invitation was so compelling, they could do no other. It does sound beyond comprehension. It could not possibly have happened that way, could it? Surely no one would change a life based on two words from an unknown traveling Nazarite. Or, maybe it did, just the way Mark and Matthew both tell the story. In prayerfully studying, translating, and interpreting this text, scholars, theologians, teachers and preachers test the limits of human language to describe what actually happened. John Wesley provides perhaps the simplest comment in his *Notes on the New Testament*: *“they forsook their employ and constantly attended Him. Happy they who follow Christ at the first call!”*

From there, the descriptions get rather eloquent. Here are a few of their phrases, and I invite you to pick the one you like and ponder it: “extraordinary disruption” (New Interpreter’s Bible); “compelling urgency” and “change of milieu” (Lamar Williamson); “sheer abruptness” (William Placher); “crisp radicality” (Fred Craddock); “radical discontinuity” (Nancy Kestner); “relentless spontaneity” (Frederick Buechner); “exuberant urgency” (Theodore Jennings).

I believe that a radical invitation such as this moves us from institutionalized religion to a missional engagement with the world; from business as usual to a bold, risky, faithful following. The urgency of a response from us is captured in the word *immediately*. It appears here and often in the Gospel of Mark and suggests, at least to me, that there is no time for another study committee, or for delaying a response until we check out the polls or personal opinion surveys of those who sent us here.

What Jesus does in those brief encounters is to transform lives and identities, and to initiate through them by the grace of God, what John Wesley would name as a mission to reform the continent beginning with the church; to transform the world, starting with us! *Immediately* means there is urgency to the task.

This radical invitation to follow Jesus essentially changes the direction of one’s life. For those first four along the Sea of Galilee, the direction and plan for their life was pretty much set. Their business was fishing; it was all they had ever known; and, at least for two of them, it was an inherited business. Their identity was shaped by what they did; and how they lived and where they lived was determined by their work. They could see very little beyond the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

When Jesus comes along, they are engaged in their routine work. Peter and Andrew were casting their nets into the water; James and John had thrown their nets so many times the nets needed repair. But now Jesus offers them a different direction. It points them toward the vision of the Reign of God that is already breaking in upon the world, embodied now in the presence of Jesus the Christ who says, “I am headed this way, let’s go to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind.” And *immediately*….

 Have we missed something in our comfortable, convenient, contemporary ways of doing church? In a recent issue of *The Christian Century*, editor and publisher John Buchanan wrote, “Jesus did not ask [the first disciples] to subscribe to a set of theological propositions, nor did he want them to feel anything. He asked them to follow, to decide to get up from what they were doing and go with him.” (April 4, 2012, page 3) None of us today can “follow” if we are stuck in our seats. To reclaim our movement status means we cannot sit around and hope things will get better. We actually have to get up and go with Jesus into a world filled with pain, violence, and injustice. *Immediately….*

This radical invitation to follow Jesus also provides a new purpose, a new reason for being, or in our more appropriate church-related language, our mission. It is as if Jesus is saying to them, “look, you have had one purpose in life, and that has been to catch fish; follow me and you will still be in the business of fishing but it will be focused on people, and not taking them out of the water, but rather leading them into the waters of baptism.

This fishing analogy may make some of us rather uncomfortable. But remember the text tells us that this is “net fishing” which means they cast their nets into the water and pulled into their boats every kind of creature of the sea. Our tendency has been to fish for only a certain kind of person, namely those who are like us – whoever “us” is. But the mission on which Jesus sends us is to proclaim, embody, and live out the good news of God’s love for the world, and for all people wherever and whoever they may be. It is our mission. And *immediately….*

In the next two weeks, we will be stretched and pulled in many directions. We will be at times overwhelmed by the sheer volume of paper, people, and programs. We will fall exhausted into our beds, and rise with very little sleep for the next day of significant decision making. In the midst of all that will come at us, will we have ears to hear this call from Jesus that is both directional and missional? I have it on good authority that Jesus will show up here in Tampa while we are busy with our nets. If this text is any indication, we will be invited to leave it all behind and follow him. *And, immediately….*