

Matthew 4:12-23

ANSWERING THE CALL

Last month I was saddened to learn of the death of Dan Fogelberg, who was a gifted musician. He was well known for writing and performing such songs as Same Old Lang Syne, Longer, Run for the Roses, and many other familiar and well-loved hits. I am especially fond of his song, Leader of the Band, which is a tribute to Dan Fogelberg's father, who was a quiet man of music and passed his passion for music on to his son.

In the Leader of the Band, Dan Fogelberg offered this autobiographical insight as to what made him who he was:

My brothers lives were different

For they heard another call

One went to Chicago

And the other to St. Paul

And I'm in Colorado

When I'm not in some hotel

Living out this life I've chose

And come to know so well.

I thank you for the music

And your stories of the road

I thank you for the freedom

When it came my time to go –

I thank you for the kindness

And the times when you got tough

And, Pap, I don't think I

Said I love you near enough—

The leader of the band is tired

And his eyes are growing old
But his blood runs through my instrument
And his song is in my soul –
My life has been a poor attempt
To imitate the man
I'm just a living legacy
To the leader of the band
I am the living legacy
To the leader of the band.

I share that opening song for several reasons. First, it speaks to me on a deep level. Like Dan Fogelberg, I realize and am profoundly appreciative of the fact that who I am as a person is directly linked to my parents' influence, which goes far beyond my physical features and genetic makeup for "the song of their lives is in my soul" as well. Second, we live out the lives that we have chosen (or, perhaps even more, the lives that have been chosen for us) to the best of our abilities. And, third, the sentiments found within those lyrics set the stage for today's gospel lesson. Just as Dan Fogelberg resonated with and responded to the call of his father's music, likewise, whether we realize it or not, we are here because we have been summoned by God and, as best we can, we are intent on "answering the call."

According to Matthew, even though Jesus had been baptized by John and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, it wasn't until some time later that Jesus publicly came on the scene. The event that triggered Jesus' appearance was the arrest of his cousin, John the Baptist. Somehow this signaled the end of one chapter in Jesus' life and the beginning of something new. Jesus answered the call and claim of God the Father on his very life. He left Nazareth (never again to return to live in it) and he took up residence in the town of Capernaum by the sea. Matthew is quick to note the fulfillment of Isaiah's earlier prophecy that the "lands of Zebulun and Naphtali... Galilee of the Gentiles, (there) the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned."

I found it interesting that the word "Galilee" came from the Hebrew word galil, which means a circle. The name, Galilee of the Gentiles, came from the fact that Galilee was literally surrounded by Gentiles. On the west were the Phoenicians; north and east were the Syrians; and even to the south, there lay the territory of the Samaritans. Thus, even though Jesus came to his own people – God's chosen people, the Jews – at the same time, Jesus answered the call by setting up

headquarters in the midst of the gentiles; after all, the good news was intended for everyone. This emphasis is also found at the very end of Matthew's gospel when Jesus tells his disciples (and that includes us!), "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." (Matt. 28:19).

Jesus answered his call and began his ministry by calling others to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." "The kingdom of heaven has come near" was Matthew's way of saying "The Word became flesh" (John's Prologue). The reign of God was not simply an ideal but was embodied then and there in Galilee, particularly within Jesus. Since God had taken on human flesh in the person of Jesus, the proper response was (and still is) to repent! Jesus called for Jew and gentile alike to "Turn from your own ways, and turn to God. Reverse your sinful direction; stop walking away from God and begin walking towards God and right living" (Barclay, p. 70).

In answering the call of God, Jesus, in turn, called others to follow him. As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew, casting a net into the sea; and he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." They immediately followed him. Likewise, Jesus saw two other brothers, James and John, mending their fishing nets. He called them; they also came to him and followed Jesus.

I once thought that, upon seeing and hearing Jesus for the first time, the authority in Jesus' voice and the magnetism of his personality caused these four fishermen to drop everything and follow him. However, more than likely, they had already talked with Jesus and listened to him; then, when he challenged them to follow him, they were ready and did so at once. They too answered the call and, in time, extended the call, shared the good news of the gospel with others – until it has come to our attention! In like manner, Jesus calls us, saying, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Now, it's our turn to hear and answer and invite others to respond to Jesus' call and claim on their lives as well.

I have shared with you before my sense of call to the ministry during my early teenage years. I could not have imagined that God's call would eventually lead me from St. Louis to Austin, Texas, which seemed so far away, in order to go to seminary and then serve my first two pastorates just outside the Dallas-Ft. Worth metroplex. I assumed I would remain somewhere within that Midwest-to-Southwest corridor between Missouri and Texas. It still boggles my mind that, in the late summer of 1993, Monica and I moved our three children, two dogs, one cat, one gerbil, and all that we owned thirteen hundred miles away to Richmond, Virginia. Part of me yearned to stay where we were!

Not counting Monica, my very best friend (who also happens to be my brother), and his family were only twelve miles away from us; and, our two sisters and their families were another twenty miles away. My closest friends from seminary and in the ministry were within a two-hour radius, and my folks were less than a

day's drive away. We didn't want to uproot and leave our family and friends behind; but we did because God was calling us to a new field of ministry. We were simply trying to be faithful and obedient to God's call to "Follow," first in Richmond and now in Martinsville.

By the same token, you have come to church today because, one way or another, you have heard Jesus say to you, "Follow me," and so, here you are! In your own faithful way of response, you have left your warm and comfortable homes to venture forth to worship God and listen for God to lead you and send you. In doing so, we are striving to realign our lives and our will with what God desires. Rather than get way out in front of God, we have purposefully gotten back in line behind Jesus – after all, that's what you do when you follow someone.

Furthermore, in answering the call, we are opening ourselves up to the possibility that God can and will use us to "fish for other people." While Jesus is the Son of God, he doesn't go it alone. He does not work alone. He calls people to help him bring in God's kingdom. You and I are here today as the contemporary disciples of Jesus. Just like Andrew and Simon Peter, James and John, you and I have been called to help Jesus catch people, to throw out the wide gospel net and bring people into the kingdom, this new family that Jesus is forming.

We are tempted to refuse and say, "I could never do that!" But note several things from the text: First, even though we are called to follow Jesus because he will not go it alone, by the same token, neither are we alone; Jesus' name is still "Immanuel" – God with us! We are not left to our own devices; God's Spirit resides within us and among us so we are not powerless.

Second, notice that Jesus called two brothers, and then another set of brothers. Eventually, he added eight more disciples and together, with him, they turned the world upside down with the good news of the gospel. Jesus Christ has called us and brought us together so that we could draw strength, insight, and help from each other. Together, we serve and we can accomplish the work Jesus has given us to do.

Third, Jesus built on something the fishermen already knew how to do. He transformed their skills and used them to fish for people. Think about what you already know how to do – baking a cake, relating to children, coaching a basketball team, reading to an older adult – and then look for ways to be used by Jesus to help catch people.

One church was in a changing neighborhood. They were tempted to move. However, they chose to stay in the inner city and provide after-school care to the children in the area, who were from many different nationalities. Today, that multi-racial church is growing and thriving.

Another church realized that an increasing number of women were having babies in their town without the benefit of grandparents living close by. The church

identified the grandparents in their midst and sent them out to visit every baby born to a family within a one mile radius around the church. In a society where the family is in big trouble, a little ordinary thing like adopted grandparents can be marvelously used in Jesus' never-ending task of catching people.

One older women's Bible study group identified a real need for ministry. One of the women met a young man in her apartment who was dying of AIDS; he had been forsaken by his family and had no one. The women realized that "Jesus was calling us to be representative grandparents for people suffering with this illness. Thereafter, each of us adopted someone with AIDS and now serves as that person's grandmother. It's a little thing, ordinary, but it is something we could do." (Pulpit Resource, Jan. 1999, p. 18)

Individually or collectively, we are capable of doing for others what we already know how to do; and, in giving ourselves and our abilities, we share with others the love of God, the good news of Jesus Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus calls us and sends us to be his disciples, promising that he will teach us to catch people, promising that we shall be part of his embrace of the world. Let us answer the call and live out the good news, as best we can, to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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