

“Walking the Walk *and* Talking the Talk”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
January 29, 2017**

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 41:8-10

New Testament lesson: Matthew 4:17-23

Many of you know that before I became a pastor, I worked in public relations. I was on the management team of an organ procurement organization, which coordinates organ transplants. The CEO brought in some leadership coaches who started talking about the transformational effects of operating at all times from a place of integrity, truth-telling, and love.

I immediately recognized the power of this *and* the connection to our faith as Christians, to the teaching of Jesus. So much of what they taught could have come right out of the Bible, yet there was no mention of it. I felt a deep, spiritual connection to the leadership training and great appreciation for its power to bring people and organizations together for the common good. The problem was, I also felt a huge integrity gap in the training, since there was no mention of its Christian and spiritual roots. That’s when I first sensed God calling me to ministry.

“As (Jesus) walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’”

Back at my old job, as the consultants finished up their work, the members of my management team began to slip back into their old ways of being – sacrificing integrity for the sake of “looking good,” fudging the truth to have things go their way, and being less than loving in their interactions with one another and the staff. Of course, that’s just the human condition, when we left to our own devices.

But I wanted to be part of something that took a stand. I felt called to higher values and a more authentic way of being, as hard as that is. I wanted to be who God created me to be. I resigned my position. I would create workshops and seminars on spirituality in the workplace, casting my net, if you will, into the waters of the workplace hoping to catch likeminded people seeking a safe place to nurture and express their faith amid their everyday-life activities. As Simon Peter and Andrew were going about their everyday-life activities, their work, as fishermen, they heard a call by Jesus saying “Follow me,” and immediately (Simon Peter and Andrew) they left their nets and followed him.”

I’d like to say that I left everything and immediately followed Jesus into this uncharted territory that is guided only by God’s will. But I didn’t. Seldom does one respond to God’s calling so fully and effortlessly.

Instead, I took a job with a company providing secular workshops and seminars based on the same type of Christian, spiritual principles, but still no mention of God or the Bible. I had taken the easier path forward, and of course, I ended up pretty much back where I had been – working for a company that walked the walk but refused to talk the talk, refused to name God and the teachings of Jesus as the source of its power, its giftedness, its purpose for being.

So while I thought I was getting closer, I actually ended up digging myself a deeper hole to fall into. My new job was no more authentic to who I was inside, to whom God was calling me to be, than my previous job.

“As (Jesus) went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets....”

At my new job, I discovered the need – and opportunity – to begin mending the netting of my life, the holes and the tattered edges. This came as I found myself in what is known as the Dark Night of the Soul – a spiritually painful time that provokes deep questions and profound opportunities for growth.

It takes work to look at and try to mend the holes in your life – those areas of unmet need, past hurts, self-criticisms and the fear of trying something new. It takes work, but it is always worth the effort and the pain when you get to the other side, because that’s where new hope and unimaginable promise can be found.

“... (Jesus) called to (James and John). Immediately they left the boat *and* their father, and followed him.” They left their past behind and followed Jesus into new, uncharted territory, never looking back, always moving forward, with Jesus as their guide. That’s not quite how it went for me. Make no mistake, I quit that second job and began applying for seminary, but I was still holding back.

You see, Princeton Seminary has a dual-degree program for a Master of Divinity degree and a Master’s in Social Work, to become a counselor. I envisioned entering into the dual-degree program, thinking I might become a counselor. I was hedging my bet when it came to becoming a pastor. I wasn’t willing to go all-in. Such is the path of any seeker trying to discern – and live into – God’s will.

So off to seminary I went, but only to explore the possibility of maybe, someday becoming a pastor, but maybe not. Maybe I could go back home and settle into a more typical job, like being a counselor.

Well, within the first few months, God made it clear that he was calling me to be a pastor. And God has affirmed that call again and again throughout the past 11 years. I am blessed to be among you, following Jesus, who in his earthly ministry, “went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”

That's what we do, together, as a church – the difficult-yet-fruitful work of ministry, serving on committees and boards, -incoming elders, deacons and trustees-that's what you do- planning for and leading worship, -acolytes, you're part of that- and all the congregation-teaching and nurturing the faith, and channeling God's love and provision – care and concern – to those in need.

The point is that for any of us, following Jesus is not a straight line. It is not a pathway of “certainty of fact,” but rather certainty of faith. It is a cycle of call and response that is repeated throughout the life of God's people – each one of us. We never reach the finish line. God is always calling us to a deeper faith, a lifestyle more in tune with who we are as Christians. And the world is always calling us in a different direction.

“From that time,” says Matthew, “Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’” – turn to me, says Jesus, set aside your worldly concerns and fear-based hesitations, for God's wisdom and will are within your grasp, now, for each of us, and God will lead the way, if we would but set aside that which keeps us from moving closer to God, following Jesus more closely.

The world is always calling us in a contrary direction, but only one way leads to Christ. God calls us to continually turn to scripture, prayer, and other people of Godly wisdom and discernment as we seek our way forward.

My prayer is that your way forward – and mine – this day and forever would be made all the more faithful. And it can be, because in Christ we are made to respond to all life's challenges and joys, successes and failures with Christian integrity, Spiritual truth-telling, and Godly love. Walking the walk, *and* talking the talk, naming it.

As we celebrate in worship today the ordination, installation and commissioning of new officers and our acolytes, let us all be open to how God is calling us to serve and participate in his kingdom. And as we do so, let us not be afraid or reluctant to point to Jesus as the source and guiding Spirit of our life, that others may see Christ in us, and come to follow Jesus. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Jesus, we claim to be your followers and we say that we are your disciples. Are we really? Do we really live as you would have us live? Lord, we do seek a faithful pathway through life, and pray for the boldness to share your way, your truth, your life with other.

In this, we pray that you would give us hearts willing to turn from our own desires to follow your will. Give us courage to love our enemies, and faith that triumphs over doubt. Give us the assurance of life everlasting with you, even as you comfort those who mark the passing of a loved one, and particularly the family of Mildred Nash.

If we are truly your followers, Lord, truly your disciples, show us what that really means, and let us not be afraid to live it.

We pray all this in the name of he who lived and died for us and now reigns in glory with you, O God, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.
Amen.**