

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
May 30 & 31, 2015
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Beginning, Middle, End
Matthew 4:18-25**

Well, good morning! It's a great joy to be here and I certainly thank you, John, for that warm welcome. I love John Crosby and I love Paul and Andrea Tshihamba who have been long-time friends. It's a great joy to be with you this morning, especially on just another average day in Minnesota. It's really terrific to be able to be here, especially on a day like this.

This morning we're going to think about a topic that is probably very familiar to most of us, the topic of Called. That is a theme that runs through the whole Bible. In fact, it is certainly a prominent theme in the New Testament. We use the language frequently. It's not that it is difficult to understand, but it is often very difficult to live. So what I want to share this morning, I think, is simple but urgent and it's meant to change every day.

Lord, by Your grace we pray that we will have ears to hear and lives that will receive this as good news and that as a consequence of Your great love, we will follow You. In the most ordinary of days, in the most dramatic moments, in times of joy and celebration, and in times that require great courage, Lord, it is Your call that we long to hear today. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Our reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 4, beginning at verse 18.

¹⁸ As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him.

²¹ Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, ²² and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. ²⁴ News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. ²⁵ Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

The Gospel of Matthew is a Gospel I've sometimes thought of as the smelling salts Gospel. It's like the Gospel up your nose. It's as though the writer of this Gospel says, "I dare you to breathe

deeply of this aroma.” You cannot possibly be asleep if you take in this aroma. It is meant to wake us up. Of the four Gospels, it is by far the most assaulting and confrontational. It is the Gospel that on the one hand relies the most on the tradition of Israel and the use of Hebrew scriptures, and on the other hand, tells the greatest news about the contrast of this reality that is now breaking called the Kingdom of God that Jesus said is now at hand. It is that Kingdom with all of its assaulting, reorienting, and reordering of life that I want us to think about this morning.

Let me begin by telling you a story about a woman named Doris. At the time of this story, Doris was about 82 or 83 years old. She has often been more my pastor than I think I’ve ever been her pastor. One Sunday we were in the middle of a service I was leading at the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley (where I had been the pastor for many years) when we heard that something very terrible had happened to Doris. It wasn’t entirely clear what the story was or how the events had unfolded, but she was now back at her home and I looked forward to the opportunity of rushing there after the services to try to be her pastor at last.

I got there and said, “Doris, what’s happening?” She ushered me into her living room. We sat down and she said, “What happened was that I arrived early at church at the usual place I park. I had just gotten out of the car and was reaching back in for my muffins—you know those nut muffins that I make—I was just reaching back in for my nut muffins and suddenly I was struck from behind, pushed into my car and across the console into the passenger seat. Someone jumped into the car behind me, the keys were still in the ignition because I hadn’t taken them out, and suddenly we were taking off. Immediately I asked the man his name.” Right, I thought. Note to self: when being kidnapped, begin by asking your kidnapper’s name.

“So who are you?” Doris said. “I am Jesse.” “Jesse, what is happening?” “We’re going to your bank,” Jesse said. “Why are we going to my bank?” Doris asked. “Because I need some money.” “Why do you need some money?” “Because I’m a drug addict and I need some cash. You’re going to be my ATM machine today.” So, they stopped at the first bank they saw. He intimidated her into giving him her code. He went to the machine, got some cash, and came back to the car. Doris was, of course, very distressed and upset by this point.

He jumped back into the car and they took off for another branch of the bank. Doris asked, “What’s really happening here? Have you ever done this to other people?” “Actually, I have,” he said. “That is terrible. You are a drug addict. You know, you really shouldn’t be a drug addict,” Doris said. “Yeah, yeah, I understand that I shouldn’t be a drug addict but I absolutely am a drug addict.” She responded, “Look, what’s really needed here is you need Jesus Christ because, frankly, this is bigger than you and secondly, you need a really good drug rehab program.”

Next stop, next cash withdrawal, back in the car again. This went on for two more stops and then he was about to leave her by the side of the road. She tells him she can’t get out of the car because she is too bumped around by the whole experience. He comes around to her side of the car, opens the door, helps her out of the car, escorts her around to the driver’s seat, helps lift her legs in, puts the seatbelt across her, and gives her a kiss on the cheek. She says, “Jesse, this is terrible. You really need Jesus Christ and I’m going to pray that you get caught because you shouldn’t do this to other people and besides that, you shouldn’t be a drug addict. This is bigger than you are and again, you need Jesus Christ and you need a really good drug rehab program.” “I don’t know anything about Jesus,” he says, “but the drug rehab programs I’ve been in simply haven’t worked.” She says, “Well, I’m going to pray you get caught” and with that he was off.

I said, "Doris, this is terrible!" She said, "Well, of course it's terrible, but as I've been sitting here, I've been thinking that this happens to a lot of other people." Right! Again, I'm thinking, note to self: take comfort in thinking you are among the company of the kidnapped on any given day. When kidnapped, know your kidnappers name and find some kind of kinship with others who are among the kidnapped.

Doris said, "This was just so distressing. But the real distress," she said, "was to imagine being a drug addict and that you do this sort of thing to people. This is terrible. We really need to pray that Jesse gets caught, that he gets stopped, that he gets some sort of appropriate punishment, but even more than that, we need to pray that he gets real help." Right! I said. Doris, why don't you lead us in prayer? I find it sort of amazing that this has happened. Why don't you lead us as we pray for the trauma you have just been through?

It wasn't a terribly great surprise when a couple weeks later, she called and said she had gone in for a line-up and that, sure enough, there was Jesse, third from the left. Eventually, we went together on the day when she was going to appear in the witness box and tell the story to the judge. Basically, she got into the witness box and said, "Hi, Jesse. It's me, Doris. Remember we had that time together in the car? See, Judge, it's really true. He did do everything he is being accused of doing, and he's told me he's done it to other people, so there may be other people you need to find who have also had this happen to them because of Jesse. He needs to be stopped. I've explained that to him. I told him I was going to pray that he would be stopped and I'm just really glad we can all be together here in this moment." She continued, "But the other thing is, he really needs a good drug rehab program and, further, he also really needs Jesus. I'm going to talk to him about that, but you need to give him a really good drug rehab program."

And with all of that, eventually Jesse got sentenced. For about eight months, Doris went to visit him every week until he was eventually moved to another jail. Doris never described this event as being about her trauma; it was about Jesse's need. The focus of her concern was always about Jesse, who was so caught up in addictive behavior that he had lost track of reality, who needed to know the love of God and who needed the kinds of tools that could finally help him break his addiction.

Now, I know that for a while it was popular to wear a bracelet that said, "What would Jesus do?" I sometimes have thought that my bracelet should say "WWDD," (what would Doris do?) because I think the call of God is a call that lands us in ordinary space, whether it's traumatic or trauma-free, and we really are all called to the same kind of life. What is it that allows Doris, an 85-year-old, elegant, fine-boned, Presbyterian lady, the kind of woman you can imagine has her hair done at eleven o'clock every Friday, that sort of beautiful Presbyterian lady who actually has the capacity to see beyond her own trauma and engage in a world that simply presents itself to her in an unsought, undesirable, and unjust way? She brought to that moment what I want us to think about today; she brought a lifetime of hearing and responding to the call of God.

It is fascinating that here in the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus is so unabashedly self-oriented in the call. We've perhaps grown dull to this because we have heard it so often. Jesus simply says, "Follow Me." But it is an amazing thing that through the incarnation, the God of the universe says to us, as He said to those first disciples, "I want You to be with Me. Follow Me. Don't just hear My teaching. Don't just do certain things that might be part of an institutional set of practices. First and foremost, I want you to imitate Me, to actually

do the things that I do.” Then He says, “And as you do that, it will tie you to My mission in the world,” and He says, “I will make you fish for people.” This is a phrase that is used in Matthew’s Gospel to simply suggest, “If you follow Me, you will be with Me, and you will be with Me as I do the things that are meant to catch people in the reality of the Kingdom of God. Follow Me.” Jesus says, “Identify with Me as the center of your vocation, as the very center of your life, and that will engage you not only *with* Me, but *in* the things and the people that I am engaged with.”

What happens just after the call of these first four disciples is that Matthew is giving this as kind of an exemplary calling of the first four. We know that eventually there are 12, but He sums up the implications of the calling of the first four in this one little compressed paragraph. It says Jesus went around everywhere preaching and teaching the good news of the Kingdom of God. As He did this, people were drawn to Him. They were drawn to Him for their own needs and out of the needs of others, and they came from every tribe and tongue and nation. They were Jewish and they were Gentile. They were people who were part of the household of faith and people who were not in any way identified with the household of faith, easily those the household of faith might have considered to be complete outsiders. Yet, in this case what is being said here is that Jesus is saying, “Come and follow Me.” Suddenly in the compression of the text what we see is that those who follow Jesus are those who are now invited to not only be with Him, but to be with those Jesus loves. And at least as it’s summarized here at the beginning of Matthew and as we find it unfolding in the rest of the Gospel, what we hear again and again is that those who come to Jesus are those who are prepared to admit their needs, those who bring every kind of need, those who seem to belong, and those who dramatically do not belong, those who are like Jesse and those who are like Doris. This is the astonishing clarity.

Now it is important, in fact, I think it is urgent, that we think about the significance of call for this reason. I think there is a crisis of call and the crisis of call, ironically, is in part a function of the way the church has developed over these millennia. That over the course of time, what begins in the church’s first identity and expression is the simple act of 12 apostles being with Jesus. What gradually grows up over all of these millennia is this large apparatus that we now, with joy and sometimes with frustration, simply call *the church*, this large thing that is part of the thickness of the church. It is what I sometimes have thought of as the ecclesiastical, industrial complex. All of the stuff that is built up: the beautiful buildings, the budgets, the machinery, the programs, the structures, the realities, the things that we do. All of that has its place and is so commonplace, but it becomes synonymous with the assumption that somehow all of that apparatus equals following Jesus. Oh, that that were true! But in actual fact, we can have all kinds of apparatus functioning and still lose track of the central, simple, clear call. “But are you following Me?” Jesus says.

This is not meant to be a test around issues of orthodoxy *per se*. It is not about making it an affirmation, do you confess that you want to follow Jesus? That is not what I’m asking. I’m asking a different question that sounds like those questions, but is different. I’m asking, do you actually follow? That is the trick. And do you follow Jesus and not just the practices of the church? Do you wake up on a new day thinking, what is today about? What does God seek and desire for me today? Well, you know, I think of all kinds of things, our jobs, our works, our families, our neighbors, our friendships, our church activities, our community needs, our global needs. All that is there, but what I think Jesus is saying by this first simple call is that in the center of all the activity inside and outside the church, there is one central vocation. “But today will you seek to be somebody who follows Me?”

This is a much different kind of vocation than just slotting into jobs or neighborhoods or places. This is asking, in the midst of all of that, what am I seeking to discern? Am I seeking to discern what the Kingdom of God means in a context like this, a relationship like that, a situation like this? It is in the context of that kind of place that we gradually come to a renewal of our vision of who we are, of how we are to love, and how we are to serve. It is an entirely different instinct. It is a Doris-like instinct. Doris was a person who could encounter someone like Jesse, and after years of practicing daily what it meant to be a disciple, was absolutely clear in her moment of trauma that she was called to be herself, and that was what she wanted Jesse to know as his call as well.

But this is going to require change. It does in the New Testament. It does throughout the life of the church, but often that can get buried. Let's think about some of that transition. I remember a day, for example, when a man appeared at the door of the church in Berkeley where I was serving. He introduced himself as he stood in the doorway and said, "I'm very successful. I'm very powerful. I have lots of money. I don't have a lot of time for this conversation, so I'm wondering if we could have a quick chat?" I said, "Wow, that's quite an introduction. By all means, let's have a conversation. What's up?" He said, "Well, my wife has been coming to this church and coming home and talking about Jesus, and at dinner she'll occasionally bring up Jesus. I really don't know anything about Jesus, so I thought I could stop by for some quick bullet points. If you could just give me some quick bullet points about Jesus, then it would make dinner more comfortable."

I said, "I do see your dilemma, but the thing is, I'm not very good with bullet points and secondly, if I gave you some bullet points, they might have a way of working their way into your life, and you'd have to rethink your power and your success and your money and your family and your use of time, and I just don't have the sense that you want to do that." "Oh, I totally don't want to do that," he said. "Exactly," I said. "So why don't we just brainstorm some ways to move from Jesus to some other topic you would feel more comfortable talking about?" He said, "No, no, no, I'm serious." I said, "Oh, so am I. I don't want to be responsible for completely reorienting your life when you clearly don't want that to happen." He said, "Well, what if I came back for an hour?" I said, "An hour is just kind of like a fat bullet point. I'm not sure if it would really be a lot better." He offered two hours, but I wasn't biting. Then, he sort of leaned in and said, "What if I came back for a whole morning? And by the way, I don't give anybody a whole morning." I thought, yeah, I bet you don't.

So, he rolled up and we had our first morning together. It turned out to be the first of several such mornings. I could not discern that this man had any spiritual appetite. There was no presence of God moving in a way that would make you think this was a kind of an awakening. This felt absolutely two-dimensional. There was no *there* there. He told me many times never to expect him in church because he just didn't like churches. I said, "I understand. There are lots of people like that. I sometimes feel that way myself."

I was shocked when suddenly, there he was in the third pew! Wow, I thought, things must have really gotten terrible at dinner. What is this about? We had a little conversation after the service. When he started to speak, he was suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. I said, "Oh my gosh, what's happening?" He said, "Well, you know I just don't like churches. I told you that before. I just don't like churches. I don't come to these places." I said, "Yeah, I've heard that." He said, "Well, I was visiting another city and I went into the side chapel of this building because I'd

heard it was a beautiful building. I was just sitting by myself in the side chapel and all of a sudden, I felt overwhelmed. The only explanation I have for it is that God visited me, and now it's just a mess." I said, "I know. It goes that way. It does. It goes that way."

Now six years later, it's gotten messier and has required him to rethink his power and his wealth and his use of time and his family and his resources and everything else about his life because that's what happens when you hear the call of God. When Jesus says simply, "Come and follow Me," the me is no longer a man for neither his own life, nor me at the center of my life. I am not meant to follow me, Mark. I am meant to follow Jesus Christ, but that's going to require a profound change of identity of location. I am not waking up every day simply asking the question, "What do I want or need to do today?" but instead, "What does Jesus Christ want for me today and what does He want to do through me, because I'm seeking to follow Him today?" That is a very, very different calling.

One time I was speaking at an event that had such bright lights on the stage that literally I could see almost no one I was talking to. What I could see was a really large video monitor pointed toward me that had an image of me and then on the other side of the stage another large video monitor that had another image of me. And then, of course, there was me. Me, me, and me. I thought, this is sort of a post-modern trinity. This is the world that I was made for. This is the world that everything in my culture has bred, the desire that everything is about me all the time, and where everyone is completely engaged in the same things I am. My life and my world are about me. That is the universe we've been steeped in. Then along comes the Gospel where Jesus says, "Now see, your life will be abundant when you follow Me."

Years ago there was an article in the *Wall Street Journal* about the growing popularity of private jet travel. It focused in on a widget maker who had become a gazillionaire and had the prerogative of flying privately. It was a human interest type of article, and this widget maker talked about the popularity of this kind of flight. He said, "It all turned for me one day when I was flying in first class from one side of the country to the other, and there was a woman in business class who had a baby that cried the entire trip. That settled it," he said. "I decided, I'm never going to fly commercial again," and then he gave his mission statement. It was this: "I've decided that the really important thing to me is to exclude from my life anyone who might bum me out."

Okay, let's just meditate on that a moment. "I've decided that the really important thing to me is to exclude from my life anyone who might bum me out." I read this and for a few minutes thought, that is just so disgusting. Then I thought, oh, this is just awkwardly familiar. Now, I don't practice this in the same way that he does, but it would not be untrue to suggest that I do the kinds of things every day, visible and invisible, to exclude people from my life who might bum me out. Is this not why we have caller ID on our phones? Is this not what Mark Zuckerberg understood so well when Facebook was being developed that it became seamlessly possible to friend and unfriend people? I have the prerogative and gift of having an administrative assistant who works for me. Administrative assistants were invented, in part, for the sake of keeping some people in and other people out. Now, it is all done very elaborately. This also explains where we live, where we drive, how we drive, what we drive, who we're with, who we're not with, where we go, what we do, how we spend our time, how we spend our resources. It's all an elaborate sociological scheme. The painful thing is that sociological study after sociological study suggests that when you look at the lives of Christian people in North America, their lives

often look very much like everyone else's life. Yet these are the people to whom Jesus says, "Come, follow Me. Let your life be a peculiar reflection of Me in the world."

This is a remarkable text. It is so simple and can seem to be so easily affirmed and yet, it is so challenging to actually live out. It will require a different kind of vision, a different way of seeing ourselves and our neighbor and God. It's not a question of what God is calling me to do. Often this question is framed primarily around a concern, asking what is it specifically—some kind of task, some kind of specific job, some kind of opportunity—that God might want to bring to me? What is that thing that God most wants me to do? I think the thing that God most wants me to do is exactly and simply and completely this: "I just want you to follow Me." This is why He says in the first and second Commandments, "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and your neighbors as yourself." This is the way that the Law expresses the embodiment of being people who hear the call of Jesus: to love God in the way that Jesus taught us to love God and love our neighbor in the way Jesus called us to love our neighbor. That demonstrates the reality of a kingdom that is not about my kingdom or your kingdom or the collective kingdom that we may hold together. It is the reality of the Kingdom of God that is redefining power, redefining what it means to be human, redefining what it means to be people of love and mercy and justice in the world. What steeps us, what shapes us, of course, are so many other things, like that post-modern trinity that defines how we see ourselves and where we are in the world. But the Kingdom of God, the love and mercy of Jesus Christ, reorders all of that and calls us to a new way of seeing.

A number of years ago I was in a pretty serious bicycle accident. I'd like to say that it was in the final part of the Champs Elysées and I was just coming down to get the yellow jersey, but actually it was just on a flat bike path in Alameda, California where there was no traffic and no water and no speed and no hills. There was no danger, absolutely no danger. This was a nothing, nothing bike ride except that there was one other bike on the path that suddenly slowed down and then abruptly stopped right in front of me. I slammed on my breaks and went up on the front tire of my bike. The other bike went down. It had straight handlebars. My face was perched straight over the handlebars, and as the tire of my bike went backwards, my face was driven straight into the end of the handlebar, which pushed my left eye back and down in my skull an inch.

It was really quite a dramatic injury. It meant that for over a year I had acute double-vision, one image here and another image there. It meant that suddenly my congregation was twice the size it had been before. That was one of the few virtues! And the other thing was, I felt like I was sort of living my Picasso season with a very, very distorted vision of the world. It took a long time to reconstruct the orbit of my eye and the muscles of both eyes in order to achieve the wonderful return of binocularity. I'm very, very thankful, but there were long weeks in that year where all I could do was lie with my body as flat as possible, without any light or music in the room. I got nauseous over the slightest thing and as a result I just had lots and lots of hours of utter silence.

In the context of that, it was a great season of prayer. It was a time to try to listen to God in a new way. Over that time in this context, I felt like God was saying to me, "Mark, I will restore your eyesight, but I want to give you something more important than that. I want to give you something that is not just about restoration of sight. I want to give you new vision. Vision is a matter of the heart. Vision is about perceiving in the way that God perceives. Gradually, over the course of that year and since that time, I've felt God regularly prompting me to say, how do you actually perceive? What are you seeing? What are you not seeing? What are you attentive to

and why? And how much of it is a reflection of a vision that is My vision? Not just the way that you, Mark Labberton, you tall, educated, white male, you person who does certain things and lives in a certain way in the world, not how do you normally see; I want you to come to see how I see.”

That is part of a call. That is part of how we come to live out our call. That is why Jesus spends three years with His disciples saying, “Now, are you following Me? Follow Me and see how I see. See how I love. See how I engage. See how I seek to serve. See how I embrace. See how I attend.” All of that is an expression of what it means to be people who are called, and it will change our sociology as it did for the disciples here in this very early moment. They were called and within weeks, they were in an entirely new context. Fishermen who were with people, Jew and Gentile, people from all around the area, people who had every kind of need and disease, people who are now drawn into this circle of people who find their life and their hope in Jesus Christ. That is the core is what hearing God’s call and following God’s call means through the rest of the Gospels.

So, friends, are you hearing God’s call? And are you prepared to say with your life, not just your words of confession but with your actions, and not just on spectacular moments and not just in isolated times, but in ordinary time, in surprising ordinary time, are you here to be a follower? So what will today be about? What will happen as we rise from these pews and go out to live in this beautiful day? And when we face not-so-beautiful days and when we face people whose lives are not-such-beautiful lives, when the circumstances are a lot grittier than they are right now or maybe quite gritty for you, whatever the context, that call of Jesus Christ is really the same. What Edina needs from you and what Minneapolis needs from you and what Minnesota needs from you, what the nation needs from you, and what the world needs from you is that you are a community of people, not buried in the ecclesiastical, industrial complex, but who are alive to the dynamic, daily reality of what it means to follow Jesus Christ. May that be your most distinctive vocation. It is the gift that God wants to give you, each of you, and all of us to the glory of His Name.

Lord, we come to You today hearing this familiar news, but reminded again that our vocation is in being with You and identifying with the things and the people that You care most about. Help us, oh Lord, to live in that way out of courage and freedom and joy with hearts and minds that expand and deepen because that is the character of Your love. Lord, thank You for the Dorises in the world who teach us what it means to be alive to Your presence, to believe that in trauma and in joy, the call is really the same; may we hear and follow You. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.