**January 26, 2014 – 3rd Sunday after Epiphany.**

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When my brothers and I were kids, we were pretty free range. Every kid in our suburban neighborhood was, especially during the summer. We were turned loose in the morning and not expected back until supper. However, if my mom needed us for some reason, or if we didn’t show up at dusk, she whistled for us. On a police whistle. Each of us had a specific number of whistles, from one to three, so if she didn’t need us all she could differentiate. And honest to gosh, that seemed perfectly normal at the time!

The thing is, we didn’t know why she was whistling. If the sun had set, we could be reasonably sure it was supper or bedtime, but any other time we didn’t know until we got home. But we almost always obeyed the whistle – or at least the second, and much more insistent, whistle.

In today’s Gospel, we have Matthew’s version of the calling of the disciples – specifically Andrew and Peter, and James and John. Last week we heard John’s version, which involved much more discussion and even an interaction with John the Baptist. In Matthew’s story, John the Baptist had just been arrested by Herod Antipas and Jesus moved his base of operation from Nazareth to Capernaum, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee.

It’s there that he begins his ministry in earnest. Unlike John, as I said, where there is a lot of conversation and back and forth, today he merely strolls up, first to Peter and Andrew and then James and John, and says “follow me.” He embellishes it a bit for Peter and Andrew by saying, "follow me, and I will make you fish for people," but it’s still a pretty simple message. Follow me.

One a side note, once again, our NRSV translation doesn’t quite get it right, in an effort to make the language less masculine and more inclusive. The word *halies*, is the exact same word used in the previous verse describing Peter and Andrew, “…for they were fisherman.” If he had said, “I will make you fish for people,” Jesus would be telling them that he was going to impel them somehow to do something different.

But by saying, “I will make you fishers of people,” he is saying that if they follow him he would transform them. Instead of DOING something different, they would BE something different. It’s a tiny semantic point, but I think it speaks to the power of Jesus’ call to these soon-to-be disciples.

So here he comes, a perfect stranger from out of the crowd, and says, “follow me and I will completely change you.” And they DO. Other than that one cryptic phrase, they don’t know why he’s calling them, but they know they have to answer that call, so they simply drop what they’re doing, turn their backs on their former lives, and follow.

Would that we all had such faith! Sure the disciples all show cracks in their faith from time to time, sometimes spectacularly as in Peter’s case. But when Jesus called them at the very beginning, they didn’t question the wisdom of it or make contingency plans, or even tell anyone. They turned away from their lives and simply followed.

I’ve said this before, but it’s worth saying over and over again. Notice that God called FIRST. God always calls us first, then patiently waits for us to follow. Sometimes we are so wrapped up in our troubles or even in our good times that we can’t hear that call. Sometimes we hear it, but are too distracted to do anything about it. Sometimes we hear it, and are too stubborn or too angry and block it out. And sometimes we hear God’s call, but feel too unworthy to follow.

I think this last one happens a lot. Who am I to do God’s work? Who am I to think I could possible make a difference, especially the way the world is today? Surely there are people more talented, more spiritual, more charismatic than I am who could do this work much better than I possibly could?

And then there’s all of the doubts AFTER you’ve decided to follow the path that God has set you on. Am I doing the right thing? What if I mess it up? What if this is all in my head? I went through a lot of that insecurity when I first was called to the priesthood, even though that call was really loud and insistent in my case. It probably had to be or I might have let those fears get the better of me. But God is both patient and persistent.

This is one reason why Matthew’s story of the calling of the disciples is so wonderful. At first, these new disciples are the epitome of faithful followers, leaving everything behind to follow Jesus. But even for the apostles, life intervenes and fears set in.

Later on in Matthew, in chapte 14, we have the feeding of the 5,000. Even after traveling with Jesus and witnessing him doing miracles, and even after being sent out to perform healings and miracles themselves, the disciples doubt Jesus’ ability to feed so many people. Then, a little while after that pretty spectacular miracle, the disciples see Jesus walking on water during a storm and Peter’s fears land him in the drink.

They are full of doubts. They are human, just like we are. As the writer Anne Lamott once said, “The opposite of faith is not doubt, it’s certainty.” When the disciples first followed Jesus, they did so on faith. Then that faith was tested, and sometimes fell short. But they continued to follow.

Just as God is persistent, so should we be. Persistent in trying our best to follow Jesus. Persistent in putting God’s call to us before the problems and distractions that happen to us every day. And persistent in dragging ourselves over the gunwhales of the boat, wringing out our clothes, and moving on after we have doubted.

Sometimes we experience doubt together as a parish. Sometimes we worry that the money will run out. Sometimes we worry that we won’t grow and we’ll just fizzle out. Sometimes we worry that we’re not making enough of a difference.

But God has called us – each individually, and as a parish community – to do his work here on earth. And God is patient and persistent through our doubts and fears. In a couple of minutes, we’ll meet together for food, fellowship, and our Annual Meeting. Since Annual Meetings are a necessary evil, along with all the business we have to conduct, why don’t we also take this chance to talk about God’s call to us, and to share our hopes and our dreams, and maybe some of our doubts and fears? This will be, and should be, an ongoing conversation, but it would be great to start in earnest today.

God called us first, and is still calling us. Let’s drop our nets and follow. Amen.