Lech Acharai

February 9, 2025

What Do You Want To Be?

One of the graces of coming from a large family was that I had a whole gaggle of cousins who were roughly my age. Not only did this make family gatherings more tolerable, our parents even swapped us out for large parts of the summer when we were teens. It was pretty common for a cousin to come to stay for a month or two. These cousins lived all over the country, so I got to spend a month or two in Connecticut one summer, another year in Florida, while these poor cousins had the joy of vacationing in rural Wisconsin.

It was less about the destination, though, and more about having a built-in friend. I remember one night in the middle of one of these visits. One cousin and I were lying in bed, giggling, long past lights out, and the topic turned to what we wanted to be when we grew up. She said she wanted to be a physical therapist and I said that I wanted to be the President of the United Nations. I mean, c'mon, you've gotta have goals, right?

Well, after a series of careers, she actually is a physical therapist. As for me…

Many of you probably have similar memories of lofty dreams. Your goal may not have been President of the UN, but it might have been to be a marine biologist or to sing on Broadway or to cure cancer or to be the Packers' quarterback. For many of us, most of us, our childhood dreams eventually get set aside. We were the star of the high school musical or basketball team or chemistry lab, but then don't get the callback or the scholarship or the grade in college and our careers take a different path. Some may see it as our dreams fading, though it's probably more that they right-size themselves. After all, at any given time there are at most two, maybe three Packers' quarterbacks and at least a dozen kids hoping that will be their future.

This memory comes to mind as we plumb the story of the call of the disciples today. In Jesus' time, all young men would study Torah, but not everyone was called to be a rabbi. Around 14 or 15, the same time that I was dreaming of becoming the next Boutros Boutros-Ghali, if you had proven yourself worthy, the time would come for the rabbi to choose disciples. Now, imagine when you were in high school, and you auditioned for the school play or tried out for whatever sport you were interested in. You wait, hopeful, dreaming about the future. In your mind's eye, you are making your Oscar acceptance speech or being selected for the NFL Draft.

But everything hinges on you getting selected as Puck for this year's production of "Midsummer Night's Dream." Then, the day finally arrives, the cast or roster is posted, and you're not the lead, and the slow slog toward a different future begins.

If a boy in Jesus' time were chosen to be a disciple, the rabbi would walk up to them and proclaim, "Lech acharai." In English, "Follow me." If you heard these words, it meant that you had been chosen to study, to "walk in the dust of the rabbi." If you didn't? Well, there was always the family business, following your father and grandfather and great grandfather into carpentry or stonework or fishing.

When we meet Peter today, he's older. Nothing in the scriptures says exactly how old, but he's old enough to have a mother-in-law, so it's safe to say that he's a grown man and has been at this fishing business for a while now.

Whenever I hear this story of Peter and James and John's long night catching nothing, I always imagine there's something between nostalgia and angst in Peter's demeanor as he follows Jesus' encouragement to cast his net to the other side. I imagine Peter is in the same boat as so many, remembering the big dreams of youth and wondering how in the world he got to this point. Reality is that existential crisis about our positions in life is not new. Then Jesus says, "Lech acharai." Follow me. How affirming!

Imagine your last big role was as Elizabeth in the Christmas pageant and then a casting agent says, "I see something in you. You've got star potential." This is a radical thing Jesus is doing. He's calling the folks who also-ran. He's making his band of disciples out of those who had been passed over. He didn't do this a chapter ago, with the young, fresh, eager minds in the synagogue. He called a bunch of middle-aged fishermen who, if today's lesson is any indication, weren't even very good at that.

I always wonder why Peter and James and John were willing to drop everything and follow Jesus, drop their nets, drop their dad. It makes more sense if we imagine that following the rabbi isn't a new idea to him, but rather the fulfilment of a dream deferred.

According to Father Nathan Monk:

> "This is the type of timeline correction that we all dream about. The 'what if' is becoming a reality, and we have to imagine that they are all pretty shocked … I wouldn't be surprised if a single tear rolled down Peter's dusty cheek as the words he had spent his youth hoping to hear were spoken over him. Would he have been in shock? Confused? Maybe he accused Jesus of making a joke in poor taste. This is a radical thing Jesus is doing; he's calling his disciples out of those who had been passed over. These are the guys that had been previously considered 'not the best of the best.' They were the folks Jesus chose to build his new kingdom from, not the elite players but the second fiddles. These are the kids who had already been rejected, and Jesus is walking in saying, 'I choose you.'"

THAT lesson is phase one of our sermon today: that "you're always worthy, even if someone didn't see it back then." (Nathan Monk)

Even if you didn't apply yourself or live up to your potential, God sees something in you and is calling you: "Lech acharai. Follow me."

Called

If our first lesson is that it's not too late, that God can, and indeed does use the second and third and even fourth fiddles, our second lesson is that we're being called to flip the script and do something new. Here again, the scriptures are so subtle, it's easy to miss.

The idea of fishing for people is not what's new. In Jeremiah, Amos, and Habakkuk, we read of sinners being caught by hooks and nets. What is new is that Jesus transforms this image of divine wrath, catching sinners in nets, and turns it inside out.

> "You're afraid of getting caught in one of God's nets? Well, I'll tell you what, from now on you'll be the one catching sinners! And not so they might be

> damned, mind you, any more than you're being damned today. On the contrary, we're out to catch sinners so they might be healed!"
>
> (Salt Project)

The levels of despair and fear that I'm hearing from people is unprecedented. So much of what we've held dear, so much of the justice and inclusion that people of good will have given their lives to build over the last century seems to be being imploded in our midst. The attempt to erase the very existence of trans people, the blatant disregard for our responsibility to safeguard those who are the victims of war and genocide, even the transgression of that most fundamental of rights, the right to self-determination, are all bridges we never imagined our society would cross.

To that, I hold up the two lessons of our text today. You, who didn't become the next President of the UN, who didn't engineer the Mars rover, who didn't write the great American novel, are being called by Jesus today to do something even more important. You're being called to stand up for all that is good and decent and fair and just. You are being called to drop your nets, the tools that you've been relying on for so long that they've become something in between safety blankets and crutches, and live up to that divine birthright deep within you. You are made in the image and likeness of God. Jesus lives at the core of who you are. Now is the time to act on it.

In our first reading today, Jeremiah tries to deny God's call with the excuse that he's too young. Whatever your excuse is—too young or too old, too busy, too stuck in your ways, too timid, too small—Jesus is calling you. Today. Call your legislators. Attend a protest. Donate money. Build someone up.

In his book "On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century," Timothy Snyder admonishes us:

> "Make sure you are talking to people and doing something. The logic of 'move fast and break things'...is to gain quick dramatic successes that deter and demoralize and create the impression of inevitability. Nothing is inevitable."

Then Snyder goes into what I believe is absolutely Gospel to what we're going through right now:

> "Do not be alone and do not be dismayed. Find someone who is doing something you admire and join them."

If you need inspiration or a touchstone, go back to Jesus' call sermon from two weeks ago, Luke 4:18-19:

> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Or steep yourself in last week's scripture from 1 Corinthians 13: "Love is patient, love is kind, slow to anger and rich in kindness."

Hold on to that and then put flesh on it. I don't care if it's at a macro or micro level, whether you're affecting government or simply loving one person. Live. That. Text.

Conclusion
There's a phrase that's part of the Jewish wisdom literature called Mishnah, that says: "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." This has not been more true in most of our lifetimes. You are not going to be able to accomplish everything that needs to be done to transform this world into a society rooted in mercy and compassion and justice, but that doesn't give you a free pass. Do justice now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly with one another now.

Friends, no matter your history, Jesus is saying to you today, right now: "Lech acharai. Follow me."

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
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