

What does it take?

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 21, 2018.

Immediately they left their nets and followed him. Mark 1:18

What would it take for you to be compelled to give up your whole life to follow a stranger with a mission to change the world? We've heard about people being brainwashed to follow a charismatic cult leader. They and their leader's stories never end well. Though Jesus' mission to redeem humanity seems idealistic, his disciples follow him because of the urgency of his message and the force of his personality. He provides what has been missing from their lives.

Following his baptism and temptations in the wilderness of Judea, Jesus moves to Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. If you go there today you can still see the foundations of the home where Peter lived with his extended family. Nearby is the site of the temple where Jesus taught. You can see fishermen out in their boats, casting their nets out on the water as they have done for centuries. It is as though nothing has changed. One of most powerful spiritual experiences I had in the Holy Land was out in a boat on those waters watching the fisherman casting their nets as the story of Jesus calling the fishermen was read to us.

In gathering together his followers, Jesus does not go where they live. Instead, he goes to where they work to see what they do for a living. The fishermen work long hours, day and night, in all kinds of weather. They have a working knowledge of the places where they will most likely find a good catch. In calling the fishermen to follow him, Jesus tells them that he will make them fishers of people.

What strikes me is how the fishermen drop their nets; leave their homes, their livelihood and their families to follow an itinerant preacher whom they hardly know. The Christian mission would never have gotten off the ground were it not for those brave souls who were willing to give up everything to follow him.

On the surface, the fishermen are not likely candidates for the daunting task that Jesus has to redeem the world. They are neither educated nor wealthy and have no status or influence with the power structures, but Jesus knows what each has to offer. Because of the urgency of his mission, there is no time for delay, no excuses to be made. In the same way Jesus calls us to join him in his mission to renew the world. Nothing is ever again the same when we commit to following him.

When people say that they don't have time for something, it usually means that they are not interested. We can always make time for what is important to us. The disciples make the time to join Jesus in his mission even though they are not fully aware of what it will cost them.

To understand the extent of Jesus' mission, read the accounts of Paul's missionary journeys in the Acts of the Apostles. Read the letters of Peter, James, John and Paul. They went about teaching and healing under the pressure of living in the time of persecution of Christians. They were articulate in proclaiming the Good News of redemption with conviction because they believed in the purpose of Jesus' mission.

The great 19th century preacher and bishop Phillips Brooks drew in the people of Boston to Trinity Church through his powerful preaching and transparent personality. In his Lyman Beecher lectures in 1877, he emphasized that preaching is "truth through personality." When he died unexpectedly in January 1893, the people of the city of Boston closed their shops and offices and turned out in great numbers to attend his funeral in the Church in Copley Square. After the service in the church, eight Harvard crewmen carried his casket aloft out into the square for prayers and hymns for the overflow crowd waiting outside. Such was the effect of his powerful personality and preaching.

It is because of the commitment of the disciples to the prophetic vision of Jesus that the Christian church now covers a quarter of the world's population. It all began with those early evangelists who were willing to risk their lives to bring the message of the Good News of the gospel to God's people. The concise but very profound message of the gospel has been said to be like one beggar telling another where to find bread.

Each of us is commissioned to share our faith in Christ. Part of the reason why Jesus chose fishermen to join in his mission is because faith is more caught than taught. There can be no hand-me-down Christianity, no faith by proxy. Each of us has to respond to the call of Christ on our own. No one can do it for us.

The church today is made up of people of widely diverse backgrounds all sharing in common the need for greater depth of meaning. The example of sacrificial love that Jesus offers us is authentic. He lives what he believes. You can trust a man like that.

There is no need to be embarrassed or apologetic about sharing what your faith means to you. If you know of any who feel that something is lacking in their lives but are not sure what it is, share with them what has meaning for you. Living your faith means thinking through what you believe and being willing to take a stand on issues of compassion and justice. There are times when we have to go against the tide to witness for what is right.

People who research trends in the church have found that the average Episcopalian invites someone to church once in every twenty-seven years! That amounts to just three people in an average lifetime. We need to be above average in reaching out to bring people to Jesus.

When we make the commitment to Christ, our priorities, our assumptions, our values and our goals are reordered. We don't allow ourselves to lapse into incivility. We don't allow truth to be trampled over by falsehood. Having a moral compass prevents white male supremacy where xenophobia and vulgarity are no longer acceptable. We are encouraged to appeal to our better selves in appreciation of what diversity has to offer.

Let us be remembered for standing with that long line of faithful souls stretching back over two thousand years who have patterned their lives after Christ. If our present generation is to be remembered for decency and civility, it depends upon our having a moral compass to guide us in the way of compassion, truth and righteousness.