

Responding to Jesus' Call to Come and follow Him

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Dahlia Lithwick wrote the following spiritual reflection in Slate.com (Sept. 6, 2013): For many years, I kept two battered slips of paper in my wallet. One read, "I am a speck of dust." And the other, "The world was created for me." Recognizing that both of those directives are simultaneously true and urgent can be a life's work, according to the teachings of Rabbi Bunim of P'shiska. But when my family arrived in Jerusalem just around this time last year, for strange, mystical reasons beyond my control, only the one that said, "I am a speck of dust" remained.

When people asked why we were taking our children from bucolic central Virginia to an unhinged nuclear Middle East for a sabbatical last year, I tended not to answer, mumble something about a year with cousins and grandparents, or mumble some obscure kabbalistic formulation about tzimtzum—the act of contraction. We would be in a tiny apartment in a big city, with two weeks' worth of clothes, a few toys and books, and then we'd see what it meant to truly become a speck of dust.

...In Jerusalem every stone you step on and every wall you walk past is built upon stones and walls from other conquerors, on the rubble of the vanquished that came. It's difficult to maintain the belief that the whole world was created for you, when you come to understand that it was in fact destroyed, rebuilt, destroyed again, all before you were even a speck of dust to begin with.

In such a world-- we struggle to keep both maxims in balance: in the one hand: "I am a speck of dust." In the other palm, "The world was created for me."

Beloved of God, in such a world, we might ask ourselves, "How important can mere individuals be to the Kingdom of God?"

In such a world, we might also ask ourselves, "What in fact IS required of us as disciples of Jesus?"

Our Gospel reading for today speaks to both of those questions as we read about Jesus calling His first disciples. We can look at last week's Gospel lesson from John as a prequel to this week's. Last week, Andrew, then a disciple of John the Baptist, heard from John that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John went on to tell his disciples that that he had come baptizing that Jesus might be revealed to Israel. Andrew, thrilled with this news, left John and

went to find out more about Jesus. He then went and got his brother Simon and told him that they had found the Messiah and he brought Simon to Jesus. Jesus looked at Simon and said to him, "You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas (which is translated Peter or Rock)."

Thinking about this event in last week's Gospel, it makes more sense to us when Jesus came along and said to Andrew and Peter, in today's Gospel, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." The text says that immediately they left their nets to follow him. Last week's Gospel would lead us to believe that they knew who Jesus was and had in fact spent some time with him before he called them to follow him. The same may well have been true of James and John, whom Jesus also called to follow him, though we have no record of it.

The introduction to today's Gospel tells us that when Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been arrested by Herod, Jesus withdrew to Galilee, probably to get out of Herod's range, lest He too be arrested too soon. He did not return to Nazareth where He grew up, but made his home in Capernaum, a fishing town, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee.

As Jesus called these first disciples who were fishermen, Jesus used a fishing analogy. He said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Had they been in some other line of work, no doubt Jesus would have used some other analogy. Had they been farmers, Jesus might have said, "Follow me and I will make you grow people in the fields of the Kingdom of God." Had they been carpenters, maybe Jesus would have said something like, "Follow me, and I will make you construct people."

Think of your present vocation. If Jesus lived in our day and time, how might He have invited you to follow Him. If you are in banking or the financial world, perhaps He would have said, "Follow me and I will make you invest in people." If you are a salesperson, He might have said, "Follow me, and I will make you purveyors of the Good News of God." In Broadcasting, "Heralds of the Kingdom of God." Give it some thought. What might Jesus have said to you had He lived in our day. It's worth thinking about knowing that He HAS called you and me to follow Him just as surely as He called those first disciples. And, to some degree or another, we have left what we were doing in the sense that what we do to make a living or our place in life is now somewhere down the list in our priorities as we try and follow Him making His will for us our first priority.

I read a beautiful description this week of what it might look like were we to shift Jesus and His plans for us to the first place in our lives. This was written as part of an obituary of Mary A. “Pink” Mullaney, an 85 year old woman who died on September 1 last year leaving behind 6 children and 17 grandchildren. So adored was she by her family members that they crafted the following words as part of her obituary:

Let a dog (or two or three) share your bed. Say the rosary while you walk them.

Got to church with a chicken sandwich in your purse. Cry at the consecration of communion, every time. Give the chicken sandwich to your homeless friend after Mass.

Go to a nursing home and kiss everyone. When you learn someone’s name, share their patron saint’s story, and their feast day, so they can celebrate. Invite new friends to Thanksgiving dinner. If they are from another country and you have trouble understanding them, learn to listen “with an accent”.

Never say mean things about anybody; they are “poor souls to pray for”.

Correspond with the imprisoned and have lunch with the cognitively challenged.

Offer rides to people carrying a big load or caught in the rain or summer heat. Believe the hitchhiker you pick up who says he’s in landscaping and his name is Peat Moss.

Help anyone struggling to get their kids into a car or shopping cart or across a parking lot.

Give to every charity that asks. Choose to believe the best about what they do with your money, no matter what your children say they discovered online.

Allow the homeless to keep warm in your car while you are at Mass.

Take magazines you have already read to your doctor’s office for others to enjoy. Do not tear off the mailing label, “Because if someone wants to contact me, that would be nice.” (From Huffington Post 9/7/13)

As we think about that woman’s obituary, we heard all kinds of ways to “fish for people” with Jesus, even if some of them may have involved risks that may not be wise to take. Despite that, we can’t help but see the heart of our Lord Jesus in that woman, can we?

I was pondering the Gospel passage from the daily office yesterday. It was Matthew's version of the sending out of the disciples. He cautioned them to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. He went on to talk about how the Gospel divides people, sometimes even family members. He also told them that following Him would put them in conflict with the world and worldly powers.

"The truth is that the Good News of Jesus has been in conflict with every culture in which it found itself, including the very first culture it encountered. In a couple of months from now, we'll see where Jesus' open handed fishing got Jesus and his people, to the Cross." (Will Willimon from Synthesis, 1/26/2013)

And yet, like Jesus and like the Jews, we Christians are called to be people through whom the whole earth will be blessed. To do this, we have to be interested in the faith of others. We will never know how another's faith story intersects with ours until we hear their story. And then, when we have cared enough to listen to another's story, then that person might just be interested in our story. And by telling my story and your story, that person will no doubt be introduced to Jesus, the one whom we are following.

In this way, we can respond to Jesus' call for us to make disciples of all people groups. By being His disciples, by being a Christ follower, it becomes easy to fish for people because we can simply invite folks to come and follow Jesus, the Savior of the world, with us.

And going back for a moment to Mary Mullaney's obituary, there is just no telling what kind of doors we open by those little acts of kindness like helping someone corral their kids in a parking lot or making a chicken sandwich for someone who is homeless or the thousand other ways that we can reach out with love to those around us.

You and I may just be specks of dust in this vast universe. But remember this, "Our loving God created this world for us and put us here to be a blessing to others and to bring those others with us to worship and to serve the Living God. AMEN.