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Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23  
The Friendliness of Jesus

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>18</sup>As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup>And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." (Matthew 4:18-19, RSV)

Some men are meant for the hermit's hut. Jesus was not such a one. He was sociable. There have been faithful Christians who have separated themselves from the city, from the village, from their neighbors, and gone off to dwell in caves in the mountains. St. John Chrysostom did that for two years.

He lived with extreme asceticism and became a hermit in about 375; he spent the next two years continually standing, scarcely sleeping, and committing the Bible to memory.<sup>1</sup>

But Jesus was not such a solitary man. John the Baptist might have been an ascetic, but Jesus was not:

<sup>18</sup>For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; <sup>19</sup>the Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds." (Matthew 11:18-19, RSV)

By temperament, Jesus seems to have been companionable. He was glad for company. In this morning's reading, he seems to have desired the company of four fishermen: Peter and Andrew, James and John.

In the end, Jesus desires your company too. Indeed, his heart is so large that he is lonely without everyone! And therefore his final marching orders to the Church are that we are to go out and win everyone to him:

<sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I have commanded

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St.\\_John\\_Chrysostom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._John_Chrysostom)

you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20, RSV)

Some people are introverts. Being around others tends to exhaust them. But Jesus was not like that. He would have companions. Indeed, the Church believes that Jesus desires companions “in all times and in all places,” including you and me, late-born people that we are. We are so very different from the village folk of Galilee of two thousand years ago. We have technology they never dreamed of. We have opportunities and anxieties very different from theirs. We are very different from the fishermen along the seaside, yet we should be pleased to think that Jesus lives, knows the hopes and dreams and fears of our generation too, and wants us too.

I am glad that Jesus is not a melancholy loner. If he were, that would leave us wondering how to fit it with him. But no, he is the one who takes the initiative. He comes up to strangers, to people working away at their jobs, and to everyone and says, “Come, follow me.”

It seems to me that between last Sunday’s Gospel story and this morning’s Gospel story, we have two different models of folks coming to Christ. I think that by far, the more common way of coming to Christ is shown by last Sunday’s story in which a trusted friend points people to Christ. But if, alas, you have not been blessed by someone in your life who introduced you to Christ, then listen to your own heart, learn the stories of Jesus, and see whether Christ might be saying to you as he said directly to the fisherman, “Come, follow me.”

Both ways of coming to Christ are important and carry responsibilities. Let me linger with them a bit.

For many of us, there was a *personal* element to our faith. We came to Christ because our parents led us to him, for example. With her good-night prayers, mother helped pray us to Christ. With his table grace, father helped bring us to Jesus. With their virtue and their hope that goes beyond this world’s understanding, mother and father gave a good witness to Christ, and we simply followed along. Yes, we followed, and have never regretted it.

This reminds us of the importance of our witness to our children and to others. With the conduct of our lives, let us bring glory to Jesus. Let us be good shepherds to those entrusted to us, guiding them along to their true Good Shepherd.

On the other hand, if we have been blessed with parents who tried to bring us to Christ, let us not squander the good testimony that has been shared with us. Tears might have been shed for us, we so worried our mother’s heart. Many a restless night might have been lost to our father as he lay awake in the wee hours wondering how life was going to work out for us. In some sense, those tears are precious, those lost hours testify to love for you. I think we have been blessed if there is *someone* in our life who has tried to lead us to Christ, and maybe now is the time to honor that blessing by yielding to the influence of that one.

The Bible encourages parents to train up their children in faith:

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6, KJV)

But there is nothing automatic about this for either the parents or the children. Parents can be faithful teachers of their children, yet the children can steadfastly reject the faith of their parents. The children might calculate that other ways of life are better. Or alas, the children might resist the teaching of the parents because they note that the parents themselves do not even seem to be trying to live according to that teaching. Conversely, there are children who become disciples of Christ ahead of their parents. It was not mother or father who brought them to Christ, but other people important in their lives. And, through God's grace, it might be the case that the children end up bringing their parents to the Lord. So, there is nothing automatic about training up the children in the way they should go. It requires work and integrity on both the part of the parents and the children. But one way or the other, many of us come to Christ because we followed the example of Andrew of old. For him, that trusted one was John the Baptist. John pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world." And Andrew up and went to Jesus. Likewise for many of us: Someone we trusted urged us onward, and we followed and never regretted it.

The other model is more individual. You come to Christ not because of mother or father or sister or brother, but because on your own, you found Christ and judged that you wanted to walk with him. God bless you strong if that has been your path! You were, as it were, fishing along the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus called out to you, and you dropped your nets and followed him. John the Baptist was not there pointing to Christ, "Behold, the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world." No, you were pretty much alone in your life of faith. But you learned something of Christ, and you resolved to yield your life to him. And I say, God bless you strong for that!

This model might be the trend of the future. When I was a boy, it seemed that everyone down there in Denton, Maryland knew Jesus and thought well of him, even if some of them failed to follow him with much integrity. But faith was in the air. I simply grew up knowing an awful lot of Jesus and the faith of the Church.

This is no longer so true. There are young people crossing the thresholds of our churches nowadays who know little about Jesus, little about the faith of the church. They simply come, following a godly instinct, that *maybe* there is another way of living in a city that is very stressful, very competitive, and very tempting. And so they come walking into the church, perhaps shy, perhaps afraid that people will either talk with them or ignore them. They might be disoriented by the liturgy at first, yet if they somehow manage to hang in there, at last they might hear Jesus calling to them. "Come, follow me." Is that true for you? I hope so. And I hope that you will take up the divine invitation.

But here is the thing about Christ's call to discipleship: When Christ calls a man, calls a woman, he means to *change* that one:

<sup>19</sup>And he said to them, “Follow me, and *I will make you* fishers of men.”  
(Matthew 4:19, RSV)

Jesus is not content to leave us as we are. And that is the way of good friends: they make us better. Jesus is the best friend we are every going to have, and he desires to make us the very best we can be.

There is an old rule of moral theology that goes like this: One becomes virtuous by doing the things a virtuous person does. Thus, one becomes courageous by doing the things a brave person does, regardless of how wildly the heart might be beating and how terrified the soul might be. And one becomes just by doing the things a just person does, regardless of how covetous the heart is and how much it would rather be unjust. In general, the heart tends to follow our conduct.

That is why Jesus phrases his call in the manner he does: He bids us, first, to “follow me,” and it is in the following that he will make us fishers of humanity and winners of souls.

Would you be a Christian? Then do the things Christ does. If he would walk away from some temptation, then you follow him. You walk away too. If he would cool his wrath and drop his angry fist, then you seek peace too. If he would forgive the repentant sinner seventy times seven, then you forgive too the sinner who repents and seeks your forgiveness:

<sup>21</sup>Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”

<sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. (Matthew 18:21-22, RSV)

The older I get, the more it seems evident to me that Christian discipleship is a matter of using our Christian freedom, of choices, of doing and of refraining from doing. Occasionally, by the grace of God, the Spirit moves so strongly in our lives that it is easy to do the Christ-like thing. But more likely, the call of Christ will be a sweet voice within a myriad of voices tugging you in various directions. The trick is to learn to listen to the voice of Christ, and then to obey.

And then to see what he will make of you! He took those fishermen and made them apostles. He took those blue color workers, with no military training, and he made them conquerors of the world -- not of empires and territories, but of human hearts. And he will make something good of us too, so that when all is said and done, folks will look back on us and say this person was a blessing on our earth, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.