

You Want Me to do What?
a sermon by Joe Hoffman
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It is a strange story really. We don't know many of the details. And we must remember that it is theological storytelling. It is not meant to be literal or historical – except that Matthew wants to give us a perspective on the start of Jesus ministry. This is a quick overview of what is to come. It is a glimpse into the future.

John the Baptist has been arrested. He was the last great prophet – the hinge on which the ministry of Jesus begins. Jesus begins by preaching the same thing that John did – only the messenger is different. The realm of God is at hand. Prepare the way. Bring forth the realm of justice. Bring forth the realm of peace.

And so Jesus takes a walk by the sea – and he finds Simon and Andrew, James and John. And strikes up a conversation. And in that conversation he says – come and follow me. They probably ask back – and what do you want me to do? And Jesus says – I want you to come and fish for people. To help me in my work of bringing forth the realm of God.

Interestingly, the disciples are said to drop their nets, leave their homes, and follow.

Now, this is a confusing thing. To leave home. To leave work. But what Jesus is saying is that the realm of God calls for a reorientation, a new direction, embracing a new possibility. We have to see ourselves differently. Our identity becomes child of God, follower of Jesus, which is more significant than our last name, or our occupation. Our choosing to follow Jesus is a journey into a whole new set of relationships. It is not taking on the family business, but starting out on a new vocation.

We are called from the very places of life – from home, from family, from work. We are called from being a brother, sister, mother, father, co-worker – and we become something more. We are peacemakers. We are lovemakers. We are partners in the work of bringing blessing and grace and justice to the world.

This must have sounded strange to four fishermen. They must have asked – you want me to do what? You see, it sounds strange to us too. Those of us who are teachers, farmers, social workers, real estate agents, business people, computer experts. You want us to do what Jesus?

Some years ago there was a vacancy in the US Senate. I don't remember all of the story, but I know the party leaders of the state named a successor to fill the remaining term of the one who had died. And the instructions were pretty basic – we want you to do what we tell you to do. In other words, this man would be granted the power and privilege of a political office so long as he voted the way the leaders of the party told him too.

So he began with this. A lot of what they wanted was the same as what he wanted. But not always. And so sometimes he would swallow hard and just do as he was told. But then one day, a piece of legislation came up that would create a damn – and hundreds of families would be displaced by the lake that would be formed. The project would benefit a lot of people who wanted to boat and swim and play – but it would take away the homes of many others who did not have much to begin with. There were a lot of issues that concerned the senator – but the party said to vote for it. And it was going to be a close vote. His vote was likely to be the swing vote.

This time the senator went to see his pastor. He explained what was going on. And the pastor counseled him and asked him – what do you believe is the right thing to do? What will benefit the coming of God's way in the world? When you can answer that, you will know what to do.

A few days later the senator called the pastor. He was excited and obviously joyful. He said: I just wanted you to know that I figured out the answer to that question you asked me. And I voted against the project. I could not with a clear conscience support the displacement of all these folk so that others could have a place to play. So pray for me pastor. I won't be a senator for long. But today I made a difference. My vote was the deciding vote.

What do you want me to do? Jesus calls us to do whatever we have the power to do. To name our vocation as bringing forth the realm of God. To name ourselves as those who follow and live in the ways of Jesus. Yes we are members of a family. Yes we work our jobs. But first of all, we are people who long for God's love and grace to be known among us all. We long for the world that God imagines for us.

The goal of following Jesus is to do what we can to bring the realm of God into fuller measure. It requires that our lives be transformed. I think this has to happen over and over again. How many times I have had to say – okay God, here I am. Again. Use me. Show me the way. Give me courage.

Noel is away in Peru. Heard from her this morning – doing fine. Having a good time. While she has been gone, I have fallen back into my old ways. Eating supper later – and sometimes while watching a ballgame on tv. Not cleaning up the dishes until the next morning. Those kind of things. How easy it is to slip back when I am not focused on what it is that I might need to be doing. A silly example I know. But isn't that the way it is in our lives. For awhile we are passionate. Doing all we can with our new love for life and faith and community. And then we get tired. We perhaps get disillusioned. We rationalize that we deserve a little break. And we get lazy. You know how it is. We have to keep waking up again and say – oh, yeah, I do these new things because they matter. They help create the world I most want to see. What I do – no matter how big or small – matters none the less. And if we all do what we are called to do – what a world this can be.

Jesus called these ordinary folk to follow – he knew they had what it takes to help bring forth God's way on Earth. Jesus calls you and me the same way – we have what it takes.

And as we rename ourselves, as we figure out what we can do to help bring forth this new way, we will leave old ways behind. We will find new partners on the way, and they won't be exactly who we expected them to be. They will not be like us. They will represent all of God's creative diversity – because you see, God doesn't play favorites. We are all blessed and loved. God brings into our community the one we thought we had left behind. The one who pushes our buttons. The one that sees things just the opposite of how we see it. You know what I am saying. And together, God calls us to work at it. To remember that what holds us together is not that we think alike, look alike, dress alike, whatever – but that we together have heard the call to follow. To be partners with Christ in making a difference so that the realm of God breaks forth in our midst.

You want us to do what God? To be a source of love and blessing. To make peace. To embrace grace. To do justice. To offer kindness and compassion. To want these things most of all. To know that compassion requires confrontation. That peace requires passion. That love requires patience. That justice requires hope.

You want us to do what God? We are just ordinary folk. You can use us? You call us?

If so, I guess we each must decide how we will answer that call.

I wonder what we will do?

Amen.