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***Follow Me***  
***Matthew 4:17-25***

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the **kingdom of heaven has come near.**”<sup>[b]</sup><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 people.**”<sup>20</sup> Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. <sup>22</sup> **Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.***

*<sup>23</sup> Jesus<sup>[c]</sup> went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news<sup>[d]</sup> of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. <sup>24</sup> So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, people possessed by demons or having epilepsy or afflicted with paralysis, and he cured them. <sup>25</sup> And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.*

When I read this story, and how they left everything to follow this Rabbi that they didn’t even know,  
I wonder—***why did they do it?***  
And ***why do we follow Jesus today?***

I have often wondered what was going on ***in the heart of Peter,***  
before he left to follow Jesus that day.  
Was he happy as a fisherman?  
Did he think he could handle life on his own?  
***Did he realize he needed something more?***

They say that ***God meets us right where we are.***  
And God shows up in ***ordinary times and places.***  
Which is so true.  
And true in this story.

Jesus didn’t wait until Peter showed up in the synagogue  
and responded to a sermon.  
***He went outside the synagogue (which is a lesson for us!),***

*to where Peter worked.*

He arrived as Simon and his friends were done with a day of fishing,  
And had caught nothing, according to this story in the Gospel of Luke.

Anyone seen the series on Amazon Prime Video called *The Chosen*?

It's the story of Jesus' ministry.

They use the scriptures as most of the dialogue,  
and the way they act it out is very compelling.

It makes it very real, and easy to understand.

And Simon Peter being called by Jesus is an especially powerful moment in the series. Peter has come to the end of his rope when Jesus walks into his life.

Matthew says that they *immediately* left their fish, their boats, their families, and followed Jesus.

*Why would they leave and follow immediately?*

I wonder if they knew that something was missing in their lives?

I wonder if they realized they needed a Savior?

Increasingly the fastest growing group in America is the *NONES*—  
people who when asked their religious affiliation say: NONE.

But, surprisingly, many consider themselves spiritual people,  
often believing in God, but *on their own terms*.

For the Nones, it's not about needing God, or a Savior,  
or that something is missing in their lives.

Spirituality is something different.

I once read an article about a mom like this,  
who was so proud that she had raised her kids *without any concept of sin*.

Interesting, right?

She was teaching them to be ethical, moral, compassionate, caring for the needy  
and the environment, but without any relationship to church, or God,  
or the idea of sin.

*Why?*

Because she was raised in a strict fundamentalist family  
where the idea of sin hung over her head all the time.

She lived in fear of hell every day of her life,  
and was punished severely for every mistake.

It *pushed her so far away from God* that she vowed to shield her own children from all of it.

*But what does that do to life?*

Without the concept of sin, how do we *understand our need for God?*

*The world's need for God?*

Without sin, *we're just on our own*—no redemption, or new life.

People who delete sin from their vocabulary can struggle to identify what's happening the world....

Now, they can *care deeply about right and wrong*,  
And teach their children to be compassionate,  
But their *solution to the brokenness* in the world is  
to *just work harder* to bring justice and overcome it.  
Which is a tall order for imperfect people, isn't it?

*We've all tried it* at one time or another though, haven't we?

Being in *charge* of the world...

Trying to *fix everything and everyone*.

The problem is, we can't.

Eventually we *encounter a crisis we cannot fix*,  
no matter how hard we try—and life seems to come apart.

And the *choice becomes*----

Admit you need help beyond yourself, like God,  
*or give up because you've done all you can.*

In the series *The Chosen*,

Peter is trying everything to make his life work before he meets Jesus.

And it's not working.

He's *struggling*.

Internally, in his family, in his business.

He needs help.

He needs a Savior.

But like most of us, he is *determined to make it on his own*.

Sound familiar? Our culture values *rugged individualism*.

We want to *handle* everything ourselves, and be in *charge*,  
and keep everything under *control*.

We spend a ton of money and time *learning about SELF-help*.

But *self-help can become self-centered....*

*We DO need to learn self-care.*

But we *do NOT need to become self-centered.*

In fact, as Christians we could argue that *focusing on ourselves does not lead to self-care, nor the care of anyone else.*

So, what if we could focus on the *only Person who can truly help us?*

The Only One who can bring us what we are missing?

The only One who can bring us redemption! Grace! New Life!

How could we do that?

Jesus says love *God, and our neighbor as ourselves.*

Which starts with *knowing that we are beloved* children of God, not for anything we do, or anything we have.

Just for who we are.

And then we are called to *love our neighbors—because they too are children of God.*

This is different from the world--

The *world encourages a focus on self.*

*And self-reliance.*

*Jesus encourages a focus on Him.*

*Reliance on Him.*

Which leads to love of God, and neighbor, and ourselves.

Following Jesus, like I told the kids, means we *keep our eyes on Him.*

We can't be looking around at everyone and everything else, or ourselves.

We have to keep our eyes---on Him.

To follow Jesus is to focus on Jesus!

Think for a moment about *your focus lately.*

*Like this past week.*

Some days, all we notice is that every stoplight is red, the drivers are aggressive, the road is bumpy, the drive thru line is too long, the coffee not hot enough, our kids are running late, our parents are struggling, we barely managed to get ourselves dressed and out the door, only to learn that our work is going to take more than 24 hours today!

If we *focus on ourselves and everything* that is bothering us, and troubling us,  
That's *what we see*.

If we focus on all the negative in life, that's what we see, and that's how we feel.  
*Negative. Down. Depressed. Anxious.*

But what if we *turned our focus from ourselves to Jesus?*

What if we realized we need Him, 24/7?

What if this helped us to see absolutely everything in a new light?

We might start to notice that a driver actually let us in, the sun is shining,  
the car was already filled with gas, we woke up breathing, we have a family,  
we have a job today...

And that's what we see, and that's how we feel.

*Grateful.*

*Doesn't that sound life-giving? healing? redemptive?*

So, where is *your focus*, where are you looking, who are you following?

It is yourself? Is it someone or something else?

*Or is it Jesus?*

How *could you focus on Jesus?*

Today? This week?

Because when we *see Jesus in our everyday lives, we start to see the good.*

And by seeing the good,

we become the kind of people who *draw others to Jesus.*

Because *gratefulness is contagious.*

*Joy is something people want* in life.

And when we have it, other people notice.

They want to know *how we got it,*

They want to know *who we are following.*

What if that's what Jesus meant

when he said he *would make them fish for people?*

What if he was changing their lives,

*so that they would change other lives?*

Kind of like when Jesus says in Matthew 5 that we are the *light of the world?*

That we should let our light shine before others,  
so that they will give glory to God?

***Why would the disciples they leave everything and follow Jesus?***

Remember how the passage begins and ends?

Jesus announces the inbreaking of a new kingdom—the kingdom of God!

And he brings a whole new way of life,

By teaching, and healing and preaching—he is changing people!

***What if they left everything and followed,***

Because they realized they wanted ***that new way of life?***

And they couldn't find it on their own?

You know, our Women's Retreat was about being ***Calm in an Anxious World.***

We talked a lot about ***where to focus our time and attention,***

to find that peace of Christ that Paul describes.

Our primary scripture was ***Philippians 4:4-8***, which tell us to do ***4 things***:  
*rejoice, bring all our concerns to God, leave them with God, and think about the good.*

In fact, C.A.L.M. stands for ***Celebrate*** God's goodness, ***Ask*** for help, ***leave*** your concerns with God, and ***Meditate*** on the Good.

That is the pathway to ***the peace and joy*** we all so desperately want and need.

Max Lucado, *Anxious for Nothing*, 2019.

You'll notice that ***2 of those four things are about where we focus.***

***Rejoicing and thinking about the good.***

In ***Philippians 4:8***, Paul says: *Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about<sup>[d]</sup> these things.*

At the retreat, we talked about ***how to do that.***

How to write down our ***blessings*** every day.

How to ***thank*** God for every gift.

How to ***set a daily alarm*** on your phone, to remind you to pray, and thank God!

Just ask some of the women what they are doing at 12:30pm every day!

***We can all do such simple things—***

Like writing down 5 blessings every day.  
 Like writing a thank you note---to God.  
 Like setting an alarm to remind you to pray and thank God!

When we focus on the *Good, we are praising God*, the giver of all good gifts.  
 And when we focus on *God, we notice the good*, all around us.

*Why did they leave and immediately follow Jesus?*

What if they knew that following this man meant they would find *a new way of life, new meaning, and new purpose?*

What if they wanted to *leave behind some of the anxiety and worry* of life, and find the One who could bring them peace?

Now, does this mean that following Jesus is *all smiles and rainbows?*  
*Joy and happiness every day?*

No, definitely not.

*We know they were often afraid, because*

Jesus says those famous 4 words all throughout the Gospels to the disciples:  
***“Do not be afraid”.***

And Jesus tells them that this will not be *an easy road*.

He says that those who want to follow me must *deny* themselves, take up their *cross* and follow (Matt 16:24).

He tells his disciples that the way will be difficult, they won't always be treated well, and some will reject them (Matt 10).

***So, no, not all smiles and rainbows.***

But, they will become *Fishers of People*.

They will find a way of life much *deeper and more meaningful* than just bringing in fish.

Jesus was offering them an opportunity *to join God's work in the world—*  
***By bringing new life to others.***

And all of this happened unexpectedly.

One lesson we see time and again from the parting of the Red Sea to the Jordan River crossing—is that *God shows up when we GIVE up*.

Jesus comes to our aid when we *reach the end of ourselves*.

Which makes sense, right?

We really know we need Jesus, when we have *nothing left*.

What if they left everything to follow him,  
***Because fishing wasn't working—***  
 Luke says that they had worked all night without catching anything.  
 But I wonder if it had been longer than that, a real dry spell.

Because that's usually ***when God arrives.***  
 When we realize we cannot do life all alone.

When have you ***realized you can't do it all alone?***  
 When have you ***called out for Jesus?***  
 And are you ***ready—for Him to show up?***  
 Like, now? Today?

The poet ***Annie Dillard*** says that  
 when we come to worship we really should be wearing helmets,  
 and life-preservers, and belts in our pews,  
 expecting God to show up!

***Why did they drop everything and follow Him?***  
***And why do we follow Him today?***

What if we follow, because we realize that we are broken, and we need a Savior?  
 What if we follow, because it will bring us the ***peace and joy***  
 we so desperately need?

This week I read: "***following Jesus is risky business with great rewards***".  
*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1, pg. 335.*  
 Isn't that the truth?

Friends the ***Good News of the Gospel*** is this:  
 When we follow Jesus we find ***new life, real life,***  
 A life of faith, with ***unbelievable rewards!***  
 When we step out in faith, and focus on Jesus,  
 We find that ***any life we could create is nothing compared to the life***  
***Offered to us in Jesus Christ!***  
 May we ***Follow the One*** who bring us new life.  
 And for that, all God's people said, Amen.