

“Follow Me”

Matthew 4:12-25

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • February 3, 2013

In the United States there are about 121,000 accidental deaths each year. Accidents are the fifth leading cause of death in our country, behind heart disease, cancer, respiratory problems and stroke. So what I'm about to say may come as a surprise. Safety kills! I know what you're thinking: "if accidents are a leading cause of death, how can preventing them also be deadly?" Well, accident prevention is not the problem, safety is.

Safety is defined as the condition of being protected from danger, risk or injury. And that's where the problem comes in. Here's an example. The first house Leslie and I owned was on a cul-de-sac. How many of you know what a cul-de-sac is? How many of you *live* on a cul-de-sac? A cul-de-sac is a street formation that basically goes nowhere. It's a circle at the end of a street. And everybody wants to live on one.

Why do you think cul-de-sacs were invented in the first place? What was it that we were afraid of, that we were trying to prevent? Traffic. We didn't want our kids to get hit by a car while playing in the street. Anybody want to guess the most deadly traffic formation? It's the cul-de-sac. More kids are injured or killed in cul-de-sacs than any other kind of street. Why? Because we think they're safe. We get complacent. We don't teach our kids about street safety. We don't pay attention backing out of the driveway. And that's when accidents happen.

Guess what? The same thing happens to us in our personal lives and in the church. We get caught up in what's safe. We're comfortable. We worship in a big, sturdy, beautiful building. We have a security guard in the parking lot. Things are good—and it could kill us. Gary Haugen, the director of International Justice Ministries says, "We don't gloriously experience God's power

because we don't desperately *need* him. The church does not thrive in safety.

Today's readings from Matthew's gospel bring us to a turning point. We have the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Up until now Matthew has focused primarily on things that happened *to* Jesus – his birth, his rescue from Herod, his baptism, and then his testing in the wilderness – but now we shift to the things Jesus said and did.

Matthew tells us that Jesus left his hometown of Nazareth and moved to Capernaum, a small but prominent fishing and trading city along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The location is important because we see that Jesus doesn't choose to start his ministry in Jerusalem, the spiritual capital, but in Galilee, an area that was not at all respected by the religious people at the time. Many of the people in the area were not even Jewish. Matthew, who sees this as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, quotes from Isaiah 9, which calls the area "Galilee of the Gentiles." Even the Jewish people who lived in this area were considered less than pure.

So this became his base of operations for his ministry for the next three years, and it's where he found his first four disciples. The four disciples called in this passage, Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, became the most prominent of all of Jesus' disciples. They formed his inner circle of followers. Were these great men who were well educated? No. They were fishermen. Simple working people. But Jesus didn't choose them for what they could offer him. He chose them to show the power of God.

Beginning in verse 18, Matthew writes, "While walking 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. And he said to

them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him." Then he says the same thing to James and John as they're working with their father. "Follow me." And they do.

When I read these verses I get this mental picture of them getting up, almost like zombies, and following Jesus. I don't think that's what's going on here. Remember that the gospel writers aren't writing history for the sake of history. They're making a theological point and so they aren't necessarily interested in recording the exact order that things happened. For instance, we find out in John's gospel that Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist and so was already familiar with Jesus, and most likely all four knew Jesus and had heard his teaching.

To understand what's going on here, we need to know a little about how people ended up in their careers in the ancient world. In the first century, every Jewish boy by the age of thirteen had studied and memorized much of the Torah and the prophets. If he was among the best and brightest of his class he would be accepted into a Rabbinical School, which was attached to the Synagogue. There he would become a disciple of a teacher or Rabbi and they would follow him around, saying what the rabbi said and doing what the rabbi did. The boys who were not selected to study under a rabbi would return to their family profession of shepherd or farmer or fisherman.

We don't know any of the details of the upbringing of Simon, Andrew, James or John. But it's reasonable to say that they were fishing because they weren't selected to study under a rabbi. And then one day, here comes this rabbi who says, "follow me." It seems to me that just maybe the reason they were willing to drop their nets and follow Jesus is that this was a second chance at their dream.

But we also need to notice that Jesus is not so much making an offer. This is not an invitation to learn more about Jesus or to

accept some concept or idea or proposition. This is a command. Follow me. It's a radical command because Jesus is calling them to give up everything. Jesus calls his disciples to give up their careers, to give up the familiar and comfortable to go where he goes and to say what he says and to do what he does. And in the end Jesus calls his disciples to lose their lives in order to save them.

This call, this command to follow is not limited to Simon and Andrew and James and John. He's calling you and he's calling me. He's calling us as a church to follow him. He's not calling us to try harder, he's calling us to go where he goes and do what he does and say what he says. What he's not calling us to is safety. He wants us as a church to step outside the safety we think we've created and go find people in our world who are in trouble, who are not able to save themselves.

Jesus is calling us to follow him by stepping out of our comfort zone and invite people to church. He's calling us to follow him by going to places like Crossbridge ministries where we have the opportunity to not only feed at-risk kids but to build relationships with them so that they experience the love and presence of Christ. He's calling us to places like Mission 911, and the Pregnancy Resource Center, and the Women's Shelter, and to places like Uganda. It's not just our money that Jesus wants, he wants *us*. He wants us to get out of the cul-de-sac, out of our safe place and go where the need is and where we are not able to solve the problem ourselves. Jesus is calling us to the places where we cry out to God for help.

Is it a scary thought? You bet. Do we have what it takes to succeed? No. But Christ does. And he promises to be with us. And when we find ourselves desperately needing God, there we will gloriously experience his power.

Amen