

“Essential Personnel”

Matthew 4:12-25

January 22, 2017

With the weather we have been having this past week or 10 days, it is hard to believe that two weeks ago this area was covered with ice – which caused us to have to cancel worship services. As I listened to the weather reports and drove around the area on Saturday, January 7, trying to decide if we should have worship the next morning, there was one thing I kept hearing on the radio and on television over and over again. Reporters out on the local streets and new anchors in the studio kept saying, “If you don’t have to go out, please stay inside; and many companies are reporting that only essential personnel should come in to work.” And I wondered, “How do you know or how do you decide if you are essential personnel?” When most people hear that warning do they think, “Oh, good, I don’t have to go to work.” Or do they think, “I definitely have to go to work, because I have certain responsibilities.”

I guess if you want to be humbled, think what it means to be considered “non-essential personnel,” with the idea that your company, or your community, or the world can go on without you. While that might be reality for some people, the good news for all of us is that in God’s eyes we are all essential personnel. God’s Word today makes it very clear that we are called to be a special group of people and to do some important things, which means our community and our world are better with us than without us.

In our Gospel lesson for today Jesus calls some ordinary fishermen to do the work of building God’s kingdom here on earth. And Jesus calls ordinary people like you and me to love others, to serve others, and to do the same work. What’s interesting is that like these fishermen, many times we don’t need to learn new skills or receive extensive training in order to do the work that God calls us to do. In calling these fishermen to follow Him Jesus basically said to them, “You fishermen have been casting your nets into the sea for quite a while, now I want you to follow me as you will fish for people.” And they did. They were fishermen before and they were fishermen afterwards, but with Jesus their focus and priorities changed.

Jesus says to you and me, “Come, follow me. You are essential personnel. Come as you are. Bring whatever gifts and talents you have and use them in my name. Bring your excitement and enthusiasm and I will channel them in the right direction. Bring your commitment and care and I will show you a place where you can make a difference. Bring your love and hope, and watch them change lives.”

Jesus’ disciples were not a panel of experts. They were not well educated. They were not theologians. They didn’t have all the answers about faith or what it meant to follow Jesus. In the eyes of the world, they were some of the least likely people who ever would have been called for such a task. But Jesus often took people whom the world had labeled in many ways as non-essential – fishermen, women, and notorious sinners – and He used them and their gifts in doing the work of sharing His love with others. People who before never felt wanted, found a place where they were needed by Jesus. People who doubted the world even knew they existed were suddenly essential personnel as followers of Jesus. You and I have been made essential personnel – not by anything we have done – but because of Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins. A death that showed the magnitude of His love for us; an act that says, “I want to be with you forever, and in order for that to even be possible, I have to die. So come, follow me.”

That’s a calling that includes all of us, accepts all of us, and affirms all of us. I’m sure we have all heard that calling before in one way or another. It may have been through a friend who said, “You’ve got to come to this church, you will be welcomed there, and you could use your desire to care for others to be a blessing to so many people there.” You may have heard it through someone sitting around you who said, “You have a great voice, you should sing with the praise team/in the choir.” You may have heard it from one of our members who said, “You would be great working with our children, or serving on our altar care team, or helping to take care of our building and grounds, or reaching out to the community with your service project idea.” It happens in so many ways that we should never be surprised if we hear those words.

But every time Jesus says, “Follow me,” it affects us or changes us. What I mean by this is that while we know God loves everyone, that doesn’t mean we want to be with everyone. For example, we don’t mind Jesus trying to help the prostitute rebuild her life, but that doesn’t mean we want to be sitting next to her in church. We’re glad that Jesus heals the sick and comforts the poor, but that doesn’t mean we want the house in our neighborhood that’s “For Sale” to be converted into a shelter for the homeless or recovering drug addicts. It is

easy to be excited and honored that God considers us to be “essential personnel,” but that excitement can be reduced or restrained by the presence of people who we have not only shunned, but also tried our best not to be like in any way.

In the Bible, there is a story of Jesus talking to a woman, out in public by a well where people came to get water, and this woman had been married 5 times and was now living with another man. Instead of condemning her, Jesus said, “I have come to give you living water,” – meaning life everlasting with Him in heaven. On another occasion Jesus came up to a tax collector named Zacchaeus, who took more than his fair share in taxes from the people and was hated by the community, but instead of punishing Zacchaeus for the hardship he caused many people, Jesus decided to go to his house (even though many people questioned such a move) and when Zacchaeus repented of his sin, Jesus blessed Him with eternal life. Then there was the time Jesus met a woman who was guilty of adultery and as she was about to receive her punishment that was called for by law – death by stoning – Jesus said to those with rocks in their hands, “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.” And as the self-appointed jury put down their stones and walked away, Jesus also let the woman go by saying, “Neither do I condemn you, now go and sin no more.” And at the time when Jesus needed His friend, Peter, the most, when Jesus was being put on trial and false allegations were made against Him, Peter – after 3 years of following Jesus – denied even knowing Him. But what did Jesus say to Peter when He rose from the dead, after Peter had denied knowing Him? Jesus said, “Come, Follow Me, Peter, I love you.”

In calling all of these people – the poor, the crooked, the failures, even people living inappropriate lives – Jesus declared them to be essential personnel as well, and sometimes people in the church are offended by that. After all, life in the church would be a lot more comfortable if it were just people like us; but Jesus can’t stop saying “Follow Me” to people. And not only can He not stop, but He makes this invitation in such an indiscriminating way that almost anyone might show up.

At a time when churches are loaded with marketing techniques that are geared to attract people just like us, Jesus is out knocking on every door in every neighborhood in every section of town, calling people who we have forgotten about and welcoming people we have too often treated as non-essential; and we are affected every time.

We are affected because the call of God through Jesus is a call away from the divided, fragmented world we experience every day, and it is a call into the one family of God where everyone is welcome and everyone has a place. It is a call to share a way of life together that the world has said is not reasonable or desirable.

To you and me, to people of every race, class, land, and language, indeed to all of creation, Jesus says, “Follow Me.” And that is not a call to follow along behind Jesus, without any intent of sharing our lives with others. It is a call to love as Jesus loved, to welcome as Jesus welcomed, and to take our place alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ where all of God’s children are essential personnel.