

I Have Decided to Follow Jesus Series
“Invitation Accepted”
Luke 5:1-11
July 3, 2022
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There are lots of decisions to make in life.

The average person makes 35,000 choices per day.

If you sleep 7 hours that makes about 2000 decisions per hour, 1 decision every two seconds (Psychology Today magazine, 10/27/21).

Some decisions are easy to make. If you like Coke more than Pepsi, it's easy to decide to choose a Coke when you're standing in the gas station at the drink cooler. If you don't like scary movies, it's easy to decide that you aren't going to go see the new scary movie that just came out. Our preferences guide us and make it very easy to make decisions about some things.

Other decisions are harder. Maybe there are too many options and it's hard to narrow down and decide on one thing. What if you like Coke, *and* energy drinks, *and* Gatorade, *and* bottled ice Starbucks coffee, *and* sparkling water. Then how do you decide when you're at the drink cooler in the gas station because you have all of those options and more!

Or there could be some cost involved with making a particular decision and you have to figure out if you think the cost is worth it. If I decide to stop eating sugar, I could potentially lose 10 lbs, but I also really like eating donuts for breakfast. What do I do? How do I decide?

And some decisions are hard because we have to make them without knowing for sure what the outcome of the decision will be. Here in Jacksonville, we have this thing called school choice and last year there was a lot of discussion in our house about which high school to choose. With those kinds of decisions, it can be easy to wonder if you'll miss out on something if you don't make the right choice.

Today we are starting a sermon series that we'll be following during the month of July called "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus." Each week we'll be taking one of the lines from the hymn as our theme, so we're starting today with that initial, declarative line. I have decided to follow Jesus. The words of the hymn were inspired by a man in India who converted to Christianity in response to the message proclaimed by Christian missionaries in the 19th century. The words of the hymn were words that he declared before he and his family were killed at the hands of the village chief who wanted them to renounce their faith in Jesus.

Thankfully, we live in a time and in a place where deciding to follow Jesus is not likely to cost us our lives- this is something we are grateful for on this July 4th weekend- religious freedom – but even if we don't risk our physical lives – Jesus did say that any who would follow him must be willing to deny themselves and he said those who lose their life for my sake will find it. That's important information to consider if we think we want to follow Jesus. Do we really want to follow if it's going to cost us? And not only that, but we live in a world filled with "influencers," right? It's like looking in the drink cooler at the gas station. Out of all the choices and possibilities, how do you decide that Jesus is the influencer that you are going to follow?

In our Scripture reading this morning, we heard a story about some fisherman who had an encounter with Jesus and at the end of it we heard that they left everything and followed him. When they made the decision, they didn't yet know what it would cost them, or where it would take them, or how it would change their lives, but they were ready to give their allegiance to Jesus. When they left everything and followed him, it was the beginning of a special relationship between these men and Jesus- the relationship between a rabbi and his disciples.

In first century Judaism, devout young Jewish men who wanted to please God and live a righteous life, would seek out a rabbi in the hopes of becoming his disciple. The rabbi had authority to interpret Scripture and could give the best instruction and guidance about how to please God and live a righteous life, and when someone became a rabbi's disciple, they made a commitment to fully submit to the rabbi's teaching and authority. It was a whole-hearted, whole-life commitment. If my rabbi says this is what God's word means, this is what it means. If my rabbi says this is the behavior that pleases God, this is what I do. When the disciples left everything to follow Jesus, this was the kind of relationship they were signing on to.

One thing that I think is interesting, is that at the beginning of the passage, you don't get the impression that Simon or James and John began the day thinking that they would be anyone's disciple by day's end. It wasn't unusual for devout young Jewish men to seek out a rabbi to lead them, but it doesn't seem like that's what Simon and the others had set out to do that day. They were just doing their regular thing- going to work, cleaning up, but, then, by the end of the day they had devoted themselves to Jesus. What was it about the encounter with Jesus that day that compelled those men to open themselves so completely to the influence of Jesus and no other? What happened that inspired them to set aside any of their own life plans and goals and devote themselves to following him from that day forward? Well, there were a few interesting things that happened starting with the fact that Jesus got into Simon's boat.

What I love about this detail is that it shows Jesus making the first move. Before Simon or James or John decided to follow Jesus and become his disciples, Jesus decided to get into Simon's boat. Jesus decided that these men, these regular fisherman, were the men that he wanted to call. The Scripture passage *ends* with the men leaving everything and following with Jesus because it *begins* with Jesus getting into the boat, and this is so important when we talk about deciding to follow Jesus. The truth is, any decision that you or I make about whether to trust and follow Jesus begins with God's decision to reach out to us with mercy and love. This is, of course, a theological question that has long been debated. Do we choose God or does God choose us? In our reformed tradition we emphasize what Scripture reveals about the Sovereignty of God and we affirm that God chooses us first. It's a teaching that is meant to bring comfort, and it does, especially in moments when we may feel undeserving or unworthy of being chosen and loved by God, but it's an idea that also challenges our thinking because it inevitably raises other questions. Does God choose some but not all? And if God chooses me, am I just some kind of robot living out a completely predetermined destiny? A friend had a theology professor who used to say that theology resolves itself in mystery, and there is a mystery involved here, and yet, this is the way invitations and acceptances work, isn't it? You don't write a card to someone saying, "I've decided I'll be coming to your wedding" before they have even decided to get married or sent out an invitation. That would be weird! In the same way, we can't accept the gift of God's grace and forgiveness, and we can't accept Jesus's invitation to become his disciples, if the gift and the invitation aren't extended first. If you have decided to follow Jesus, in some way at some time, Jesus got into your boat- meaning, he made the first move. He gave you parents who taught you about him. He gave you a friend who invited you to church. He moved in some circumstance in your life that let you know he was there. He spoke to you through a Scripture. These are ways that Jesus gets in our boat. And if you still haven't decided to follow Jesus, when you do, you will

realize that at some point in some way, he got into your boat. Our decision to follow Jesus begins with his decision to choose us.

After Jesus got into Simon's boat, the next interesting thing that happened on that day is that Jesus performed a miracle. If Simon and the others needed to see something that might set Jesus apart from any other rabbis that they might have potentially followed this was something. They had fished all night without catching anything and after Jesus had finished speaking to the crowds, he told Simon to take the boat out again and let down the nets. When they did, they caught so many fish that the nets were breaking and they had to get other people to come help pull them in. This miracle was a special grace and a special revelation for Simon and the others, and Simon didn't miss what was being revealed. When he witnessed the miracle, he realized that Jesus was not like other teachers- not like anyone. Simon perceived that he was in the presence of holiness and divine power.

What Jesus did for those men on that day was something that he does still for everyone that he calls to follow him. It's an "aha" moment, that could come through a miracle or a vision or it can happen as a quiet but deep knowing. I had dinner a few months ago with a couple who had been missionaries in Nigeria in a village that did not know of Jesus. The people believed that God had gotten angry and left them and when the missionaries explained that God wasn't angry and had come to them in the person of Jesus they thought it was a far-fetched story that they didn't believe. Eventually people did start to believe what the missionaries told them about Jesus and I asked what happened that caused them to start believing? They told me that some of the people started having visions of Jesus. He revealed himself to them through the visions and they believed. I love that story, but many of us may relate more to the testimony of one of my colleagues. When his children were little, he had been attending church with his family, but he wasn't convinced about Jesus, and in particular, he couldn't believe the story of the resurrection. It seemed impossible, but on the night before Easter he decided to read through the story in Scripture, and on that night he felt a quiet sense of assurance that the story was true and he believed. We may not witness a miraculous catch or a vision of Jesus, but the Spirit does work to reveal Jesus as God's Son and the Savior that God has provided. The Spirit helps us to see what Simon and the disciples saw on that day – that Jesus is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. He is the leader, and Lord, and Savior that God has provided who is worthy of our trust.

When Simon recognized that Jesus was more than an ordinary man, he fell on his knees. He knew that he was a sinful man and he was afraid, but Jesus said "Don't be afraid! I will make you fish for people." When Simon recognized who Jesus was, he also knew who he was not. If we want to follow Jesus, we need that same kind of humility. We need to know who he is – God in flesh, the embodiment of grace and truth- and we need to know who we are – not God, not perfect, not all-knowing, but deeply loved and forgiven and called to be included in God's family and on God's mission.

It's not always easy to decide to follow Jesus, and in fact, there are times when we would probably rather not follow Jesus – when it means humbling ourselves, or taking the log out of our own eye, or trusting that his way is better than ours, but deciding to follow Jesus isn't, in the end, all about me and what I want. It's not exactly like standing in front of the drink cooler and deciding which one you like best or want the most. It's not quite that kind of decision. Instead, it involves being surprised by the Lord who gets into our boat somehow when we weren't planning to see or hear from him. It involves having our eyes opened and our hearts awakened by the Holy Spirit so that we see really who Jesus is. It involves confessing that Jesus is God and that we are not, and then gladly and joyfully accepting the free gift of his grace and the gift of his loving guidance and leadership in our lives. Deciding to follow Jesus is really a decision to respond to his kindness and to let ourselves be loved. The harder work of practicing obedience

follows that response, but it all begins when we look up and see that he has gotten in our boat. It could be that he has stepped into your boat this very morning- that he is calling and asking for your attention through the Scripture and the message that have been proclaimed this morning. Maybe you began this day like Simon- just doing your thing, going through ordinary motions- and to your surprise, you have felt his presence and heard his voice calling you. Jesus does call to us and he invites us to follow. Even if we have already decided to follow him, he invites us to respond to his grace and his call again and again and again. Will you accept his invitation? Amen.