

“Next Steps: Personal Involvement”

Today we begin a new sermon series that's going to take us from this first week (on our Kickoff Sunday) through the first couple of weeks in November. It's a series designed to support what's happening in our “Grow Groups,” as they also begin this week and continue for the next ten weeks.

If you've (thought about it) and haven't yet signed up, I'd really encourage you to look at your schedules and see if you can make it work. Being in a large group (here on Sunday) and in smaller groups during the week is where we're seeing some real growth (and life-change) taking place. We're hoping (and praying) for as many as possible to be involved.

The title we've chosen for this series, “Next Steps,” is (in many ways) a summary of the way in which the Christian life is meant to be lived out. It's a series of “Next Steps.” It's a series of day-after-day responses, one step at a time, to what Jesus is calling us to do.

It's not a “Once you were not a Christian, now you are a Christian” story. It's not a “Once you had no idea what this is about and now you have fully arrived and figured it out.” (It's not that at all.)

In fact, bottom line, the Christian faith has far more to do with what Jesus has done for us than what we do in response to him. He's our Savior. He's the One who gave his life so we could have ours. (That's our faith.) That's the foundation of our belief.

And yet, at the same time, the Christian life (and that's we're talking about in this series), is a response (in our lives) to what Jesus has accomplished for us in his. It's a series of “Next Steps,” from where you are today to where God is leading you tomorrow.

In that way, it doesn't matter if you've been a Christian all your life or if you're new to the faith. No matter where you're at, the invitation and challenge (from Jesus) are the same; to take the “Next Step” in your relationship with him. We're going to be coming at (this idea) from a number of different directions over the next several weeks.

Today, what I want to do (to get us going) is to do a bit of comparison between two stories in two of the gospel accounts, (those stories of Jesus' life), which are actually the same story, told to us (by two different writers) in two different ways. We're going to be looking at Matthew's account of the calling of those first disciples (chapter four), (the story we just heard) a few moments ago, and comparing it with what Luke tells us (in chapter five), in his gospel, about that same story. What I believe we'll find (in this comparison) is that what Jesus calls us to do (as his followers) is not as daunting and overwhelming as we often make it out to be. What it is (and what he wants) is that we begin taking the next steps in our faith-walk with him.

Let's start with the way Matthew tells the story. To give us a bit of context, Matthew is writing (in his gospel) to an audience that was primarily Jewish. (Most of his readers were Jews.) As a result, there are a number of details he could leave out, some cultural assumptions he could make, because his listeners already understand how this works. There are some things he doesn't need to include.

And so when Matthew tells us about the calling of the disciples, it's rather short and to the point. Here's how he tells it. (He says), “As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will make you fishers of men.’ At once they left their nets and followed him.”

(In verse 21), “Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.” It's a rather straightforward and to the point account. Matthew just tells us what happened.

And so, (what happens is), when we read this in Matthew's gospel, here's what it looks like. Maybe some of you grew up thinking this is how it works. These guys are out fishing. (They know nothing about Jesus.) He just randomly shows up on the shore, asks them to (stop fishing) and to follow, and they drop what they're doing and walk away.

“We don’t know anything about what you’re doing (Jesus), but good luck with the fishing business (Dad), and tell Mom we said goodbye,” and that was it. It was over and they followed.

In Matthew’s account, it might appear as if they were somewhat impulsive, maybe even irresponsible in accepting the invitation from Jesus. Now, they weren’t, and we’ll get to that in a moment.

But (for many), that’s maybe what you grew up thinking, that’s how this whole thing works. When Jesus comes along and calls us to follow, there’s really no choice, no room for questions, no time for finding out more; you’re either in or you’re out. (If you want to go to heaven) you either, leave behind everything else (and follow) or you keep on doing what you’re doing, and Jesus goes away, as does your chance. That’s what it appears like in Matthew’s account. It’s this blind decision without any questioning, and they just follow Jesus.

But in Luke’s gospel it’s a different story. It’s the same story, only with more detail. Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience. Luke was writing to the Gentiles, to those who were not Jewish. And (in doing so), he knew they would be more skeptical. They didn’t have that same background. They didn’t understand the Jewish tradition that disciples would leave behind what they were doing and follow a Rabbi, and from that Rabbi (as they went), they would learn a new way of life. They didn’t have that background. They were going to have more questions, be a bit more cynical.

And so, when Luke tells the story he puts it into context. Before telling us about the calling of the disciples (in chapter five), here’s what he says in chapter four. In verse fourteen (he says), “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.” (He says) “He taught in their synagogues and everyone praised him.”

Do you see how he’s setting it up? Luke makes the point that before Jesus even calls the disciples, they would have already known who he was. They would have heard about his reputation.

There’s even a story (in that same chapter) about how he cast out an evil spirit. (Verse 36), it says, “All the people were amazed and said to each other ‘What is this teaching? With authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out!’ And (it says) the news about him spread throughout the surrounding region.”

And so, here’s what I want you to catch. Sometimes the journey of faith is described as this path where there is no room for questions. You just have to blindly follow; and if you have doubts, you better keep them to yourself. If you have questions, it’s better if you just don’t say anything. You just get in line and follow. Sometimes it’s portrayed that way.

But Luke tells us something different (and John does as well). When Jesus called the disciples, he gives them opportunity to explore and to ask questions. In John’s gospel, the invitation of Jesus is to “Come and see.” He invites them to check it out and to see for themselves. “Come and see if it makes any sense. Come and see what happens.” He gives them room.

And so, when Luke tells us (this same story), he’s going to give us a bit more detail; not contradictory, just more detail. (Look at what he says.) In chapter five, starting in verse one (he says), “One day as Jesus was standing by the Sea of Galilee, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, he saw at the water’s edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets.”

(Verse three), “He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.” And so, obviously, Peter is listening to Jesus; he’s hearing him teach. (It’s his boat.) He’s not going anywhere. (Jesus is teaching and Peter is listening.)

(Verse four), “When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down the nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything.’

You can almost hear the questioning in his voice (right?), if not the (“What are you even talking about?”) tone in what he says. “After all, Jesus, you are a teacher and I am a fisherman. (That’s what it says on my business card.) I know what I’m doing. This isn’t the right time of day. It’s not the right place. We’ve been fishing all night. “But because you say so, (if you want me too), I will let down the nets.”

(Verse six), “When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.”

“When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!’ For he and all of his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners.”

“Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch people.’ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.”

Do you see what Luke is doing? Do you see the difference between the two accounts? What Matthew said was accurate. It’s what happened. (And his readers understood it.) But what Luke adds (to the story) makes it easier to follow. The disciples had time, they had the chance to find out for themselves, to personally become involved (and invested) in the calling Jesus had given, and then (and only then) they took that next step, and they (left their nets) and followed him.

In this series, that’s the question we’re hoping each of us will ask in our own life. “What is the next step in my relationship with Jesus? (What’s my next step?) Because, for each of us, no matter where we’re at in our relationship with Christ, there’s an answer to that question, there’s always that next step.

There are a couple of simple truths (that I don’t want us to miss) when it comes to following Jesus. The first is that “Next Steps include learning and discovering.” No matter where you’re at in your journey (with Christ), learning and discovering are always part of taking those next steps.

That was true for Peter and for the (other disciples) as they spent time with Jesus. For three years, they listened to the things he taught, had time to see and experience who he was. And so (when it all starts), when Jesus asks Peter to “put out his boat (into the water),” Peter doesn’t respond by saying “Jesus, this is really not a good time. (The fish aren’t biting.) I’m tired, I stayed up all night, so maybe some other time.” (He doesn’t say that.) No, (what he does) is he takes the opportunity to find out for himself, to see (for himself) if Jesus really knows what he’s talking about.

This is a step I hope many of you will take in your life. (It’s OK to ask questions.) It happens to all of us. You start coming to church and you like (what you see) and what’s happening, but there are all of these questions (you still have) that you’re afraid to ask. And they’re good questions. (They’re worth asking.) You just don’t feel like you can ask them.

Questions like, “How do you reconcile the goodness of God with the suffering in the world?” Or, “How do you bring together the teaching (in the Bible) about hell with this idea that God is a loving God?” Those are good questions and they’re worth exploring.

Maybe (for some of you), you went away to college and one of your professors began shooting holes into the teachings of the Christian faith, and so you start having these doubts (and these questions.) And you’re not sure what to do next.

What many people do (when that happens) is they hide behind those questions. They’re real questions, but they hide behind them, because it’s (almost easier) not to ask them. It’s almost easier to not find the answers, because (finding the answers) might have some real-life implications for your life.

Jesus wants you to ask questions. He wants you to feel free to discover and explore. That’s what happened with Peter. He took Jesus at his word (even when he didn’t think it would work.) Peter had all kinds of questions, but he didn’t hide behind them, use them as an excuse, he took the next step and did what Jesus asked.

That leads to another truth that I don’t want us to miss (when it comes to being a disciple) and that is that “Next Steps require personal involvement.” They require us to get off the sidelines (in our faith) and actually jump into the game. It moves from learning and discovering to actually being involved.

Go back to the story. To a certain point, Peter was an observer. He had been fishing. (He wasn’t going to church.) He was fishing. Jesus asks him to use his boat, and he lets him. He knew enough about Jesus, and so (he lets him) teach from his boat. And that’s when it happens. That’s when Peter becomes personally involved.

Jesus says, “Let’s try this (fishing thing) again. Let’s go out and throw those same nets out one more time. I know you’ve been doing it...your way. Let’s try doing it my way and see what happens.”

Peter was skeptical. He’d been fishing all night and had caught nothing. (He didn’t think it would work.) But because Jesus said so, he decided to give it another try...and that’s when it happened. He takes this one small area of his life and he lets Jesus take control.

I would love for some of you to try that same thing in these next few weeks. Take just one area of your life, one of those places where you’ve either been skeptical about what Jesus says, where you still have questions about whether it will even work, (maybe where it hasn’t been working for you), and instead of going after it in your way, try doing it Jesus’ way...and see what happens.

He tells us to pray for our enemies. Try praying for your enemies this next week and see if it makes a difference. He tells us to stop worrying about the tomorrows of our lives and focus on what's happening today. Try (for a few days) not worrying about tomorrow and (instead) give those worries to God. Jesus tells us not to find our security and our hope in things of this life, but to find our security and hope in him. (Maybe that's the next step you need to take?)

I'd love to see all of us try it. Take just one area of your life and instead of going after it your way, try going after it Jesus' way. Maybe it's with your finances. Maybe it's with your sexuality. Maybe it's in coming to grips with your (basic identity) as a child of God, because that's who you are. Whatever it is, even if you're skeptical, especially if you think it won't work, be like Peter and throw out those same nets...and not because you're convinced it will work, but simply because Jesus has called you to try. He seems to welcome that.

Let me close with this. Some of us grew up (in the church) with this idea that following Jesus was captured by this sentence. "Won't you invite Jesus into your life?" That's how a lot of us thought about our faith. It was simply a matter of inviting Jesus into our life. In spite of our doubts, in spite of our questions, if we wanted to (be on track) with God, the invitation was to invite Jesus into our lives.

Let me tell you something. That's not the invitation. (That's not how it works.) Peter didn't say, "Alright, Jesus, why don't you come and join me in my fishing. (Come join me in my life.) I'll show you how to fish, how to clean the fish, we can sell them at the market. It'll be a great life."

That's not the invitation. Jesus doesn't want to be invited into your life, because (frankly), your life is not what it is meant to be. It might even be a bit messed up. That's why Jesus went to the cross. That's why he had to die. (That's not the invitation.)

The invitation is not to invite Jesus into your life, but the invitation is to leave your (old life) behind and to take that next step in following him in his. Let's pray.