

James and John: They Left Everything to Follow Him

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,
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Sixth in the Lenten sermon series *Old Disciples and New*.

Text: Mark 1:20

“And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee
in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.”

This is our sixth sermon in this series on early disciples, and it is good to remember and take stock of where we are. Ms Reynolds had the idea for this series and she and I have been excited by what we have learned as we prepare and preach these sermons to you. I took the first sermon, on Ash Wednesday, and explored what a disciple is and the distinction between being a *member* and a *disciple*. I laid out the following goals for the series:

- How did Jesus make disciples in that first generation? How do we in our generation?
- How is the perspective of a disciple of Jesus different from other ways of looking at life?
- How long does it take to become a disciple and what is the role of the church in that process? Why is a relational community key to the process?
- How is a person called to be a disciple of Jesus?
- Do we have to *surrender* to God to become a disciple?
- And, finally, are you a disciple and would you like to become a better one?

I also preached the second in the series on Peter, describing how Peter’s admitted errors and his self knowledge were important to his own development as a disciple of Jesus. Ms Reynolds preached the third and fourth sermons. Her first was on the disciple Andrew, the Sunday we were joined by our friends from Integrity House. Andrew invited his brother to come to Jesus and to see for himself what discipleship might mean. She helped us understand how the relationship with other Christians in the church is a big part of making disciples. The fourth in the series was about Lydia, the business woman of Philippi. Lydia first opened her heart to Paul and his message and then her home to his band of missionaries. She used what she had been given and what she had worked for to further her discipleship and to build the church in Greece. Last week I preached on Matthew/Levi, the disciple with a past. We are the same person before and after Jesus claims us; only our direction changes. In each of these sermons we have also considered our discipleship and how we might become better disciples.

Next week Ms Reynolds will look at one of the most interesting of Jesus’ early followers, Judas Iscariot, and the Sunday after Easter she will turn to Thomas, whose initial skepticism led to his becoming the great apostle of the resurrection. On Easter I will preach on Mary Magdalene. This morning we look at James and John, the sons of Zebedee and fishing partners of Peter and Andrew. We read you the story of their call and how they dropped their nets and left everything to follow Jesus. I want to teach this morning about the nature of the call and again

return us to one of *how* questions. That is, *how do you become a disciple?* As Ms Reynolds and I discussed a few church problems this week and next weekend's Church Council retreat, we both recognized that we need a change of culture in our church to move forward. Key to the change needed is to get us to think and behave more like disciples of Jesus and less like members of an institution. We think *discipleship* needs work. Each week we are trying to give you more tools for this new way of thinking, believing and living.

It is commonplace today to observe how things have changed for the church in the last two generations. After World War II when many young families were getting started in Glen Ridge and this church built an education wing, enlarged the fellowship hall and built the chapel, during the ministry of Charles Copenhaver, things were different. People felt the need to be part of the church and to give their children training in the values of Christianity. It was as if when you lived in a town like this you had to join a church like this. That is no longer the case. That generation had seen two world wars and was determined to change the world for the better. You now have people—many of our neighbors—who like having a church in the community but feel no obligation to support it, attend its services, much less to join it and pray for it. I am sad to say that many members of our congregation are just as lackadaisical about working for the church as the non members. Increasingly, however, those who join and form the core of the church have not done so out of a sense of social responsibility but because of 'a call.' We are in here because we believe what the church stands for and teaches.

Do you know there are many people in our town and the towns around us like James and John? They work hard at jobs but sense something is missing from their lives. If a figure like Jesus appeared and asked them to follow him, many of them would drop their nets as quickly as the Zebedees did and join him. They want to be part of something bigger than themselves, but not just to have another membership card in their pocket or connect to another organization. They may not think they want to become church members but they do want to become disciples. I said, "*if a figure like Jesus appeared*" and asked them to be part of his community and movement. Guess what? Jesus has appeared and still calls people to be part of something beyond than their cramped, unfulfilling lives. He called us and through us he wants to call more. The difference in our generation and that one in the 1950s? They knew that without God, the world was going to hell—they had lived through the war. Our generation has forgotten that truth. Things are not really better but we persist in the view that we humans can solve our own problems, no matter how much evidence there is to the contrary. We tinker around the edges politically and think we have accomplished something. What is needed is transformation much deeper, more personal, spiritual. We need a makeover, inside-out. We need Jesus and we need to invite him into our lives and to decide to follow him. Just as James and John had to make an intentional decision to leave their boats, so must we decide to follow Jesus.

The first disciples of Jesus had to come to a new way of looking at the world and God. They were fisherfolk, Pharisees, tax collectors, Roman soldiers, Zealots, members of the Sanhedrin and they had to come to grips with Jesus' Kingdom-of-God worldview. Jesus changed the way they thought and acted in families, in politics, in business. Most at this early stage were all Jews. A few were not, but most were. They spent time with Jesus, and after Jesus was gone, they spent time with his apostles, the eye witnesses. In our case the challenge is a little harder. We have to come out of our Western, modern worldviews. We have to get into the

gospel worldview and then reconnect with our modern mindsets. This last step is important, because this is how we apply our discipleship to our lives and the lives of others around us.¹ “*What is in it for me?*” is probably the question many of our neighbors and some of us bring to potential discipleship. Of course, you may know, this is not a First Century/Hebrew mindset. But it is not enough for us just to condemn that way of looking at life. We also must understand that is where many modern Americans come from and so after we grasp what the Gospel mindset is, we have to reconnect with the “*What’s in it for me?*” view so we can offer something better to those trapped in the individual narcissism so prevalent around us.

Now *how* do we become disciples? In the first sermon I quoted Thomas Carlyle. His church was looking for a new minister and Carlyle said we want ‘a preacher who *knows* Jesus and not by hearsay.’ The Gospel mindset is not something we acquire from reading one or two textbooks. It comes not so much from knowing *about* Jesus as from *knowing* Jesus. To become his disciple, we need to apprentice ourselves to a teacher who knows him first hand, who knows more than trivial facts about Jesus. Today this happens first by being in church, *together*. While there are aspects of individual transformation when you become a disciple of Jesus, other people have to help you. You have to become part of a Christian subculture. Since none of us have what that first generation of disciples had—personal contact with the historical Jesus—we have to study the evidences and teachings on Jesus that they left us in the Bible. “Many Christians are very proficient at using web technology to be able to find information relating to any personal issue or question. Yet they can get so easily lost or confused in trying to personally understand the Scriptures.”² There is no shame in admitting we need help in apprehending the Gospel. That is why the friends of Jesus are so vital to discipleship.

There are no substitutes for regular worship, listening to sermons, receiving the sacraments, being connected with a small group of other disciples studying the Bible and learning from each other what the faith is all about. Being made into a disciple of Jesus means we also need to learn to pray and then to pray *regularly*. By the practice of spiritual disciplines we learn about God and ourselves.³ Becoming a disciple also requires *practicing* the faith. By this I mean going out of our way to find opportunities to serve Jesus by helping a neighbor. This technique of being made a better disciple is remarkably simple but terribly under-practiced. If you want to become a surgeon, you have to learn in school, then become a resident where you can practice medicine under the eyes of experts, and after you become certified you have to keep up your skills by continuing to study, read, and interact with your colleagues on a hospital staff. And of course you can’t just say you are a surgeon. You have to practice your profession regularly so your skills don’t get rusty. It takes years and years to become a great surgeon. Why do we think becoming a disciple of Jesus is any easier or quicker? It may take a lifetime to really become a disciple of Jesus.

As I have been speaking to you this morning, I have been calling you to a deeper level of discipleship. Do you realize that? This is how it works. This is why you have ministers educated in Christianity and who also know Jesus ‘not by hearsay.’ This morning I told you a story from Scripture about two of the earliest disciples of Jesus. He said to them, “Follow me.” He still

¹ Greenwald, Doug. Making Disciples Jesus’ Way. (Gaithersburg, MD, 2005), 17.

² *Ibid*, 21.

³ Classic disciplines besides prayer include meditation, fasting, silence, alms giving, and reading scripture.

calls. Some of you know that something is missing in your life, just as James and John were looking for something better in theirs. Yes, they had family and job and probably homes and religion, just like all of us have. But they wanted something more and when Jesus called, they dropped what they were frittering their lives away on and followed him. *Follow* means, they became disciples. Over the next few years they lived in his circle, listened to his teaching, and then he sent them out with his good news to call more disciples. It is exciting to sacrifice for something bigger than yourself, bigger than money, bigger than electronic gadgets, budgets, mortgages—maybe even bigger than life itself. It is exhilarating to follow Jesus and be caught up in his Kingdom.

During the dark days of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln from time to time used to visit the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church for a mid-day service. This had become a respite for him during the difficult years of the War. Lincoln would slip in by a side door, and leave early without being noticed. One day, when he and his aide visited the church, the President lingered in his private corner after the other worshippers had left. His aide asked, “Mr. President, what did you think of the sermon today?” Mr. Lincoln slowly replied, “I thought it was eloquent, well thought out, and powerfully delivered.” “Then you liked it?” the aide continued, trying to fill the silence. “No,” the president said. “The sermon failed. For it did not ask of us something great.”

Let me again pose the fundamental question of this series: *Are you a disciple or do you aspire to become a better one?* We must start by dropping much of the superficial stuff that fills our lives and drives our calendars. We must release what holds us back. We need to immerse ourselves in his teachings, become part of his church, and give ourselves to his call. In this appeal I make to you, it is not just about you or me or the person next to you. It is about our church, the whole congregation—the system. How are *we* doing at calling and making disciples? That is our primary mission and our calling from Jesus.

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