

What Might Following Jesus Look Like?

Beloved community, as we reflect on our scripture readings for this morning, let's wonder together: What might following Jesus look like? What might you following Jesus look like? What might our congregation following Jesus look like? In short, I trust that any living we do that follows Jesus will be abundant – bearing fruit of love and justice. And I think the love fruit and justice fruit born by one disciple of Jesus will be different in form, color, and texture from the fruit born by another disciple. Fellow disciples, let us pray:

Spirit of God, we are grateful to be gathered in community this morning. Be with us as we wonder about the ways we long to follow you in love and as we wonder about new ways we might do so. Grant us serenity to accept things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

We heard in the gospel reading, *“Jesus called to them, and immediately they abandoned both boat and father to follow him”* (Mt. 4:22).

Is a given endeavor more life-sustaining or more life-depleting? In the spring of 2011, I was rounding out my first year of graduate studies at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. I was in my late twenties, lingering after class with a friend in their late fifties. My friend was at a crossroads, feeling conflicted and needing to decide whether to continue with a significant commitment or let it go and leave it behind. In that moment, the Spirit moved me to ask my friend, “Well, is this commitment more life-sustaining or more life-depleting?”

I don't remember how they responded to my question, but I remember my own sense that the endeavor was draining their life force much more than it was sustaining their life force.

I felt deep gladness for them when they dropped that commitment even as I also witnessed the grief that was present for them as they let it go and left it behind.

Throughout the years that have transpired since that after-class conversation, I have asked the same question of others and myself countless times. Is it more life-sustaining or more life-draining? This has become my way of regularly living into the challenge that twentieth-century African American theologian, teacher, activist and author Howard Thurman once posed: *"Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."*

I believe that it is crucial that we each be honest with ourselves when assessing how much an endeavor (be it a form of employment, a relationship, or a volunteer obligation) drains or exhausts our life force (our physical, mental and spiritual energy) and how much that endeavor sustains or replenishes our life force. In my own experience and in this stage of my life, I am clear that my two primary vocations (motherhood and my pastoral calling) both steadily tap my life force.

But when either endeavor leaves a bit wilted and my branches a bit flaccid, I still feel my trunk grounded and rooted in the love of God that reminds me of my belovedness. I'm also aware that, on the whole, I experience more life-sustaining moments in both my work of mothering and pastoring than I do life-draining moments. Each life-sustaining moment replenishes my life force, building my potential for bearing fruit of love and justice. **So I wonder, is there an endeavor in your life (a commitment in the form of employment, a relationship or volunteerism) that is draining more energy from you than it is replenishing your energy? Is it time to consider dropping that net – letting go or at least scaling back?**

Years ago, when I found myself at a professional crossroads, quite sure that I was not well enough suited to the role and demands of elementary school classroom teacher and yet not at all clear on another professional path to pursue, someone I trusted offered this counsel: Try to be as clear about what you're running toward as you are about what you're running from. Timing will rarely bring any of us clarity on both simultaneously, but both are worthy of consideration.

So I also wonder, can you sense or visualize an endeavor to which you are not yet committed but which might replenish and sustain your energy of body, mind and spirit such that you can more fully follow Jesus toward bearing fruit of love and justice?

We are not superheroes. We cannot press on as vibrant trees purely of our own volition and efforts. And it is into that reality that or reading from the Psalms sheds the light of faithful longing for God's felt presence with us. Our opening song mirrored these words from Psalm 27, verse four: *"One thing I ask of you, God, one thing I seek: that I may dwell in your house all the days of my life, to gaze on your beauty and to meditate in your Temple."* (Ps. 27:4)

I wonder, where and with whom do you experience gazing, meditating and dwelling in the beauty and love that are God's presence? The Psalmist goes on to describe how that felt connection to God's presence can lead to feeling sheltered and able to hold one's head up – even when surrounded by oppressors.

Let's explore parts of our gospel reading as well. We heard,

"When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he went back to Galilee...From that time on, Jesus began proclaiming the message, 'Change your hearts and minds, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!'" (Mt. 4:12,17).

Jesus was so energized by and in solidarity with his cousin John's message about the work of building the kingdom of heaven that he was compelled by the call to keep sharing that message. And then we heard,

“Jesus said to them, ‘Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of humankind.’ They immediately abandoned their nets and began to follow Jesus. Jesus walked along further and caught sight of a second pair of brothers—James and John, ben-Zebedee. They too were in their boat, mending their nets with their father. Jesus called to them, and immediately they abandoned both boat and father to follow him.” (Mt. 4:19-22)

Of this text, preacher and educator Rodger Y. Nishioka has written, *“It is as if they were compelled to follow Jesus and to obey him, almost as if they had been waiting all their lives to hear this voice, to be issued this call, so that when it came, they dropped what they were doing... Indeed, it would seem that even these four who were already in a worthy vocation had restless hearts—so restless that when they heard Jesus’ call to them, they could do nothing else but leave everything behind and follow. Perhaps they were simply responding to what had already been imprinted on their souls from birth—the knowledge of the voice of God—so that when they heard the voice, all they could do was obey.” (Feasting On the Word A1, 286).* Words from preacher and educator Rodger Y. Nishioka.

It can be helpful to examine, when hearing and discerning voices of the Spirit, aspects of internal and external call. We sometimes hear the voice of God speaking to us in very quiet, very real ways.

We also benefit from staying attuned to what those in our community reflect back to us as ways that we are serving with love and justice – ways that we are contributing to life force in the community.

We can listen to the voice of God within and we can listen to the call of the voice of God from around us. Both internal and external forms of calling. Toward the end of the reading, we heard,

“Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom of heaven and healing all kinds of diseases and sicknesses among the people.” (Mt. 4:23)

We know from our human experiences that those were likely physical illnesses, mental illnesses, and struggles with addiction. What did it mean that healing happened wherever Jesus went? If we follow Jesus’ call on our lives to bear fruit of love and justice, then we can likely be part of more life-sustaining than life-depleting effects on those around us.

Finally, professor and preacher Greg Garrett writes this: *“Beginnings often come bearing both hope and challenge... this story of disciples dropping what they had thought was important and joining something larger than themselves... What things in your community are struggling to be born? Is your community beginning a major program or project?” (FOTW A1, 285, 287).*

We seem on the cusp at People’s Congregational Church of really discerning what is life-sustaining among us, steering away from anything that might be life-depleting. We have so much discernment to be able to do in community. We can embrace new beginnings but realizing that they have both hope and challenge. Let us work – each of us and together – toward following Jesus to life-sustaining fruit of love and justice, because Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People’s Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
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Psalm 27:1,4-9; Matthew 4:12-23