



VILLAGE
CHURCH

Presbyterian (USA)

Why Did He Choose These Guys?

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 1:14-20

January 23, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In John Irving's novel, "A Prayer for Owen Meany," Owen is a quirky, brilliant, and at times, obnoxious kid with a wrecked voice. But the most unusual aspect of Owen Meany is his unshakable conviction that he is called by God. He lives as 'God's instrument,' he says. Even as a child, he understands that he is called by God. His best friend is Johnny Wheelwright, and Johnny says, "How could it ever have occurred to me that a fellow eleven-year-old was thinking any such thing? That Owen Meany was a chosen one was the furthest thing from my mind."¹ I have a lot of sympathy for Johnny Wheelwright. We don't tend to think of ourselves as being chosen by God.

Diogenes Allen taught theology at Princeton seminary. He once said, "I have often found myself at a loss regarding spiritual matters. I found myself wondering again and again what it would be like to actually live every moment... with an awareness of God. I do not mean that I actually *wanted* to live that way, because it would be quite daunting."²

To put Professor Allen's self-assessment in the language of today's text, we seldom think of ourselves as being called by Christ. But we should, because we are.

Jesus announces that he has come to bring near the kingdom of God—or the promised day of God. And the first thing that Jesus does is find some fishermen and tells them to drop their nets and follow him. That's exactly what they do. Jesus saw Simon and Andrew casting their nets into the sea. Then Mark tells us: "they are fishermen." Does Mark fear we can't connect the dots? Does he say they are fisherfolks

because he fears that after telling us they are casting nets in the sea, we might be confused and think they are IT guys or baristas? So, he says: by the way, they are doing this because they are fishermen.

No, it's not that we are confused; they are. When Mark says that they are fishermen, Mark is telling us how these fisherfolk think of themselves. Their lives are defined by what they do. Their values are shaped by how they make a living. Their lives are defined by the culture of which they are a part. Their politics determine their values. Here's the point: Their lives are not defined by a call from God. It is perhaps rare for us to think of ourselves as called by God.

I read an old interview with Steven Reinemund. Reinemund was, at the time, dean of the business school at Wake Forest University, and former CEO of PepsiCo. He is also a Presbyterian. He said, "In speaking of my own work, I hesitate using the word 'calling' [to describe my work].... The average businessperson probably does not feel comfortable with the language of religion, and the average clergyperson probably does not feel comfortable with the language of business."³ (Perhaps we could learn something from each other.)

I think Reinemund articulates something that is common: We compartmentalize our faith. There are parts of life where faith matters, but overall, our lives are segregated. As a result, we may not understand ourselves to be called by God. We don't think that God has expectations of us or needs us in any way.

But Mark says: Jesus called these guys—these ordinary fishermen—and they dropped their nets and followed. It seems the only way to follow is to drop

¹ John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989) p. 90.

² Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today* (1997) p. 1-2.

³ David Miller, An Interview with Steven Reinemund, CEO of PepsiCo, *Theology Today*, (Vol. 60, no. 3) October 2003, p. 334, 336.

their nets. They go hand-in-hand. If I understand the text, it means they dropped the way their lives had been defined. They dropped their self-understanding and took on a new way of seeing the world. Now, they strived to see the ways of God not compartmentalized from other aspects of life, but as the lens through which all of life could be viewed.

Of course, as Professor Allen says: It's daunting. As Johnny Wheelwright says: Being chosen is often the furthest thing from our minds.

So, two things to note. First: they dropped their nets. Calling requires something of us. We have to let go of what *is* so that we can embrace what *can be*. Not always big things. Part of what we let go of is how we think of ourselves.

Here's the thing about the journey of discipleship. These fisherfolk did not know the full journey. They didn't know all that Jesus would teach them. They did not know his deeds of power. They did not know how he would suffer and that he would suffer for them. And they did not know that God would raise him up. They just knew that if they wanted to understand the life he intended for them, they had to let go of these nets that had been their purpose, or assumed purpose, every day.

They had to let go because that's the only way they can get on the journey. And the journey is the point. They had to trust that they were called by God.

I know that basketball season has begun and that we are in the middle of NFL playoffs, but there is a baseball term that I'm thinking of today. It's called 'small ball.' In 2014 and 2015, the Royals won by playing small ball. What that means is they didn't rely on the homerun and those dramatic three runs on one swing.

No, you get a bunt down. You steal a base. To work a walk. You make sure, if you get an out, that you advance the guy on to the next base. It's little things... small ball. But the little things add up. Just keep the line moving.

Sometimes our faith is small ball. Just realizing what net needs to be dropped today so we can take whatever step we are supposed to take today. Sometimes we wait for something that seems more grand, more important, but this journey is lived through the

daily choices we make with simple kindnesses and gestures of grace. And they all begin by trusting that we have been called by God.

Senator John Danforth, Episcopal priest and three-term Senator of Missouri, tells of a time he attended church on Ash Wednesday. He attended a noon service, which meant that afterwards, he would return to work. Danforth said, as soon as he got to the car, he took his handkerchief and cleaned his forehead. He says that he was embarrassed to show the world he had been to church. But removing the sign of his faith left him more troubled.

He said, "I was a Christian and I was an Episcopal priest, not just on Sunday, not just when I was in church, but every minute of every day, wherever I was. I brought the totality of myself to public office. When I entered the Senate, I did not check my religion at the door."⁴ That's a confession of what it is like to trust you are called by God. The calling greets us each morning.

But there's a second point I want us to notice. This story doesn't start with the fisherfolk. It's starts with Jesus. These fisherfolks were just minding their business and Jesus comes to them and says: I have come to bring the promised day of God and I can't do it without you.

When I was in elementary school, I played football. I'm pausing to let the absurdity of this image sink in. It's true. I was a tight end, so theoretically, I could catch a pass, but mostly I blocked. Games were played in the elementary school field which had no bleachers or even goal posts. But the last game of the season was played in a real stadium with bleachers that seems to rise up to the clouds, real goal posts and yardage markers. It was quite a feeling. The week of the final game I was playing with some buddies in the neighborhood and ran into a tree. This was not a common occurrence for me as a child, but it was not completely a shock either. The result was that I had a pretty large knot on my forehead—large enough that the pediatrician told my dad that I should not play in the game. I shouldn't even put on my helmet.

I was devastated. The night before the game, my coach called me and said that he needed my help. He understood I could not play in the game but he want-

ed me to suit up and be there because he had a role for me on the coaching staff. I arrived and he gave me a clip board—masking tape across the top: Assistant Coach. He asked me to keep up with the score (which happened to be on a real score board, but he told me that those things can be mistaken sometimes). He told me to mark down time-outs. And to make sure I never got too far from him, in case he needed other coaching duties from me.

That was the best moment in my athletic career. You see why I was proud, don't you? The coach want-

ed me. I was chosen. It was less because of who I was and more because of who he was. He wanted me to be part of what was happening.

Jesus picked these disciples not because they had special talent or spiritual depth, but because Jesus wanted them to be part of the journey. Even the call of Christ is an expression of grace.

Johnny Wheelwright said: Owen Meany always knew he was called by God. But who thinks about themselves that way?

You should, because you are.