

Sermon: Shalom and following Jesus

Cashmere Presbyterian, Sunday 26 January 2020, Silvia Purdie

Colossians 2:1-10

Matthew 4: 12-23

Each Gospel has at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry the calling of his disciples. Jesus was not a go-it-alone kind of guy. He could have done anything, gone anywhere, probably easier on his own, but the formation of a group of people turned out to be the core of it. Throughout the gospels there's an ongoing dynamic where Jesus has his public ministry, with the crowds, in the synagogues, the temple, on the highways and byways and towns, and then he has his private ministry, which consisted of intimate times of conversation with his friends. It looked to the world as though the public ministry was the important thing, the dramatic healings, the entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, being the promised Messiah and all ... but perhaps it looked to Jesus as though that was all just a backdrop to the really important thing, which was forming a small handful of people. Friendship. Discipleship. Jesus invested himself in his friends, he poured out himself to his friends. They knew him. And in knowing him they came to know the Father God. As Matthew goes on to explain in chapter 13, Jesus spoke only in stories, parables, to the crowd, but when he had gone indoors with his disciples they asked him about the meaning of the parables and he explained everything to them (Matt 13:34-36).

Who were they, these friends of Jesus who went indoors with him at the end of the day? And whose house were they indoors in? My understanding is that Jesus had just a few places where he felt truly at home and at rest. The main one was Peter's house in Capernaum, by the lake. Four of the 12 disciples already lived there: Peter and his brother Andrew, and the Zebedee brothers James and John lived just down the street. This was their home, their village, their boats by the lakeshore, and their families, their children, their wives, who were very much part of that inner group of Jesus' disciples, even though they are not named in the Gospels.

That was Jesus' home base in Galilee; his home base near Jerusalem was, as you may remember, the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus who lived in a town not far from Jerusalem.

There were the 12 named Disciples, called the Apostles in our tradition, symbolic of the renewal of the 12 tribes of Israel. Plus some others including women who are named, such as Mary of Magdala. These people learned from Jesus directly, closely, intimately. They became his family, his followers and his friends. And later they learned that following Jesus extended well beyond his physical presence with them, and they each followed his call to make disciples of others. This call took them away from their homes, some of them travelling far from Israel in the decades after the resurrection, planting the church of Jesus Christ far and wide.

Much of the Gospels tell us of the formation of these people. The Gospels invite us to write ourselves into the stories of these people, to recognize ourselves in their reactions and their questions and their struggles ... so that we too might be friends of Jesus, disciples who disciple others.

Our Gospel reading today takes us back to the very first day for Peter and Andrew, James and John, as Jesus found them at work on the lakeshore.

Jesus said to them, "Come with me, and I will make you fishers of people."²⁰ At once they left their nets and went with him. (Matthew 4:19-20)

All that followed for those men and their families began there with that dramatic invitation and that immediate response. Those words "at once", have echoed down the generations

with the possibility that we could perhaps, maybe just a few times in our lives, respond to God with a wholehearted, immediate 'Yes!', like, maybe we could glimpse the truth that nothing else matters in life but this, this following of Jesus, leaving everything, at least for a moment, turning and seeking Christ, being his friend, hearing from him. It wasn't as though those men abandoned the family business and never fished again - it was their livelihood after all - but from that moment their lives reoriented around this man and this invitation.

Paul never met Jesus personally, but he came to know Jesus as he followed, as do we. And he learned about what it means to live oriented around this same invitation. In his letter to the church in Colossae he prays for them that *they may be filled with courage and may be drawn together in love, and so have the full wealth of assurance which true understanding brings. In this way you will know God's secret, which is Christ himself. (Colossians 2:2)*

Knowing Christ means following Christ, which begins with responding to Christ's invitation. Knowing Christ, and the fullness of life he brings, is the work of his Spirit in our hearts and our minds, and living that out in our every-day.

Paul goes on to say:

"Since you have accepted Christ Jesus as Lord, live in union with him. Keep your roots deep in him, build your lives on him, and become stronger in your faith, as you were taught. And be filled with thanksgiving". (Colossians 2:6-7)

"you have been given full life in union with him." (Colossians 2:10)

The word in Hebrew that best expresses fullness of life is 'Shalom'. We often translate this as 'peace', but it is more than a feeling of calm, it is a wholeness of life, blessing and relationship.

I am heading this afternoon down to Dunedin for a week's block course on faith and mental health. Fascinating stuff! I've been doing the course readings, as you do. I am most interested by approaches to mental health which are holistic, and a theological perspective brings this broad interest in wholeness and fullness of life, including our physical bodies, our minds & brains, our relationships and culture, our emotions as well as spirituality and response to God.

One of my readings was about this:

True shalom or well-being comes from God for only in God do we find our true wholeness and complete fulfilment. In God alone can we know the wholeness of our being and the rightness of our relationships which make up what the Old Testament means by health.

As the course gets into talking about ill-health this week we will be diving in at the deep end, no doubt, into the experience of so, so many in our world of anguish and distress, anxiety and depression. And we will be talking about the reality that many Christians experience mental illness. Which is a hard reality, because it seems to deny the convictions of our faith, that we are promised Shalom, wholeness of being and rightness of relationships, including with our own selves in our own minds. For Christians who suffer mental illness there can be a sense that God has abandoned them in their time of need, that they are desperately alone in their suffering despite their belief in a loving ever-present redeemer. Or maybe all of us go through times like these, and maybe we should be more open about them – because when you are in that place it feels so lonely, and it's hard to imagine coming out the other end of it into the light again.

I want to honour the faithfulness and courage of people whose Christian walk has been characterized by more than their fair share of pain, especially this morning I'd like to honour your friend and mine, John. I have personally been so inspired by the way he holds his struggles with the darkness before God, with honesty and grace to say, 'it's hard today' and yet carry on.

And it has been my privilege and honour as your minister these past 4 years to have glimpsed for each of you something of what you struggle with, as well as the strength and resources each of you brings to life, the love and affection, hopes and talents, that give you resilience as you walk this journey of faith in partnership with Christ. I honour you all, each and every one, for how you are following Jesus.

I'd like to share this prayer from one of my text books, on Psalm 22 and depression ('*Why have you forsaken me?*' by John Colwell)

Dear Lord,

in a world characterized by so much pretence it is such relief to pray to one who honours honesty.

You know our hearts, in any case;

you know the pain we carry, the fears that oppress, the despair that engulfs;

you know the disillusionment that would mask your light and leave us in darkness.

Forgive us, dear Lord, for every attempt to hide from you.

Thank you that you are more than sufficient to handle our fears, our anger, our desolation.

Without shame we turn to you again in the name of Jesus, the one who cried out in honest forsakenness,

Amen.

My point is that following Jesus is not always the easy road. It is the way of Shalom, and I believe that a life of faith and Christ-discipleship is our best hope of sustained joy and peace and fulfillment. But that is not always what we experience. We feel grief, we feel the pain of loss. We feel stress and anxiety, because the world is not how it should be, even the church is not how it should be.

Treasure your moments of 'Yes Lord!', those times when you respond with delight and 'at once' to the invitation to follow Jesus. Maybe this morning might be one of those moments.

And treasure the strength and the gifts that only come the hard way, as following Jesus takes us through difficult terrain.

Since you have accepted Christ Jesus as Lord, live in union with him. Keep your roots deep in him, build your lives on him, and become stronger in your faith.