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“Immediately they left their boats and their father and followed him” (Matt 4:21).

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa 8:23 -- 9:3; 1 Cor 1:10-13, 17; Matt 4:12-23

In Mark’s version of the call of the Apostles (last Friday’s Gospel), Jesus spends the night in prayer on a mountain, then gathers a large group of his disciples and from them selects the Twelve. Matthew offers a much more dramatic account of the selection in which Jesus simply walks past four fishermen and tells them to “come after me.” The four, Simon, Andrew, James and John, drop everything, abandon their boats and their futures and follow Jesus. Aside from speculation that the men had met Jesus earlier and were prepared for this summons, what Matthew may be emphasizing here is the astonishing power that any encounter with Jesus had.

This idea appears again in the fourth Gospel in which Jesus is described as “looking at” someone with love, and the immediate effect is to awaken in that person a desire to be with him. Jesus looks at Peter, who falls to his knees as if Jesus had seen directly into his soul. Peter begs Jesus to depart from him because he is a sinner. Jesus has seen everything, including Peter’s potential to be leader of the other Apostles. He will even give him a new name, no longer Simon, which meant “reed” swaying in the wind, to Peter, which means “rock.”

The call of Matthew from his tax booth repeats this theme. In a reflection on this moment, Pope Francis chose his official motto to express that, like Matthew, he had been “mercied and chosen.” To discover your vocation, your “calling” in such an

encounter with someone who sees everything, including your sins, but loves you and wants you to be with them, is really a description of someone realizing their heart has been captured by another. Their life up to that moment has been mundane and inconsequential compared to this invitation to a love story.

The first four disciples responded to Jesus because he is offering them an adventure that so far surpasses their prospects as fishermen, they cannot pass it up. They are known and loved by Jesus. That is all they need to know to leave behind boats, nets, parents and a predictable life on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. What Jesus was inviting them to do -- catch others -- was also believable because it had just happened to them.

Many people lament the reality that what they do to make a living is far less than the life they want, the dream to use all their gifts to make a difference. No doubt, most of us have had to both earn a living and find a life in other ways, including volunteering, hobbies and side activities. What we really want is to hear that, despite all our ordinary ways and even our weaknesses, Jesus is still passing by and has stopped to look at us and call us by name to follow him. Whatever the cost of discipleship, this prayer persists, and rightly so, for it is our openness to God's love at work in our lives, the vocation that goes to the core of who we really are.

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