

Lucia Lloyd's sermon  
Epiphany 3  
Mark 1:14-20

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Today's program is sponsored by radio listener Rusty Lindenmeyer.

The Journey

By Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice—  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
"Mend my life!"  
each voice cried.  
But you didn't stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

As I reflected on the congregation's discussion of today's gospel passage during the Inquirers' Class last Sunday, this poem came to mind. A parishioner remarked that these two

sons are suddenly ditching their responsibilities to their father and the family business. Another parishioner wondered what it felt like for Zebedee to experience this. I felt a particular tug at my own heart, since it was just the day before that Marshall had taken Kendall to the airport to go back to college. I'd had a dream that night that she showed up back at the house because she'd missed her flight, but Marshall had already told me he'd gotten her text that she'd arrived in Ohio.

During the time we were getting ready for her to go away to college, I felt two twinges. The first was, "This college stuff sounds so exciting! I want to go off to college too!" As I reflected on this a bit more, I remembered that when you include grad schools, I've actually gone off to college five times by now, and going off to college a sixth time seems excessive even to me. The second twinge was the one that said, "Stay. How about if you just stay this age forever and sacrifice all your dreams and stick around to keep me company?" That twinge was there, and then it was followed quickly by the realization that what I truly want is the exact opposite, both what I want for her and what I want for myself.

The end goal of all the years of parenting is not to have someone I keep around to mend my life, nor is it to have someone to carry out all my instructions about how to live their life. The end goal of all the years of parenting is for the child to become someone who knows what she has to do and does it, who follows her own calling.

We talk often in church about the ways it is good to help others, and it is good. The thing is, it isn't the only good, and it isn't always the most important good. If James and John had stayed to help their father with the fishing business, they would never have fulfilled their own calling. They would never have become the people God meant them to be.

Their father might or might not be happy about this. This passage reminds me of Will Willimon, who was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, talking about a phone call he got from an irate parent:

"I hold you personally responsible for this," the father told him.

"Me?" Willimon asked.

"Yes, you. I send my daughter off to college to get a good education. Now she tells me she wants to throw it all away, and go off to Haiti as a Presbyterian mission volunteer! Isn't that absurd? A B.S. in mechanical engineering from Duke, and she's going off to dig ditches in Haiti."

“Well,” Willimon said in an attempt at humor, “I doubt the engineering department taught her much about that line of work, but she’s a fast learner; she’ll probably get the hang of ditch digging in a few months.”

“Look,” interrupted the father, “this is no laughing matter. I hold you completely responsible for her decision. She likes you. You’ve filled her head with all those pie-in-the-sky ideas!”

“Now look,” said Willimon, trying to keep his ministerial composure. “Weren’t you the one who had her baptized?”

“Well, yes” the father replied.

“And didn’t you read her Bible stories, take her to Sunday School, send her off on ski trips with the Presbyterian Youth Fellowship?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“Don’t ‘but’ me. It’s your fault she believed all that stuff, that she’s gone and thrown it all away on Jesus—not mine. You’re the one who introduced her to Jesus, not me.”

“But,” the father said meekly, “all we ever wanted was for her to be a Presbyterian.”

Willimon replied, “Sorry. You messed up. You made a disciple.”

The stuff about blooming where you’re planted is good, but it isn’t the only good, and it might or not be the most important good. The stuff about caring for those closest to you is good, but it isn’t the only good, and it might or might not be the most important good. Dutifully responding to those around you who say, “mend my nets” or “mend my life” is good, but it isn’t the only good, and it might or might not be the most important good.

Not every calling from God is as dramatic as the one in today’s gospel passage, and some are the reverse. Later in Mark’s gospel, for instance, Jesus casts demons out of a man, and the man is overjoyed and says he’s going to follow Jesus from then on. Jesus tells him not to, but to go back and tell his friends what has happened to him, to stay and do his ministry in his own community. That can be a holy calling.

Still, if we look at what keeps us from being more devoted to our faith, more devoted to God, it’s very common that the things that get in the way are things like mending the nets for the business, mending the lives of the people around us. It may be that we feel obligated to meet other people’s expectations. Or it may be that it is our own expectations that we’re supposed to

be the net mender or the life mender for other people. And when meeting those expectations is what's getting in the way of our discipleship, Jesus calls us to leave them behind and follow him.

There is plenty of mending people's lives in the discipleship James and John are called to. Jesus calls them to be fishers of people, after all. They get involved in the healing and teaching the disciples carry out. The difference is that they're following their own calling.

What Jesus is offering here is freedom. Before Jesus arrived, it seemed like James and John had to help their father fish. Then Jesus shows them they don't have to help their father fish; they are free to leave and become fishers of people. Before, it seemed like a student with a degree in mechanical engineering from Duke had to get a high paying job in her field. Then Jesus shows her she's free to be a Presbyterian mission volunteer in Haiti. All the expectations we think we have to meet, the obligations we think we have to carry out, Jesus shows us that we are free to be devoted disciples instead. It is not easy to leave the old expectations and to follow Jesus, but it's where the miracles happen.