

Third Sunday (A)

January 22, 2017

Matthew 4:12-23

“He called them . . . and they followed him.”

There must have been something about Jesus that people found extremely attractive. There is no other way to explain the extraordinary response he received when he interrupted Peter and Andrew while they were fishing in the Sea of Galilee. Jesus simply said to them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Amazingly, we’re told that they left their nets at once and followed him. Moments later, Jesus elicits the same response from two other fishermen, James and John.

Jesus intrigued and attracted these very practical and down-to-earth people so much that they wanted to be in a deeper and more constant relationship with him than they previously had been. So they courageously accepted his invitation to follow him, even though they could not have known at the time where that would lead them. After all, to be “fishers of men” was not a particularly common job description, either then or now.

Jesus did not stop inviting people to follow him after calling these first four disciples at the Sea of Galilee two thousand years ago. Indeed, through every generation down to our very own time, by the power of the Holy Spirit he is always calling people to follow him, to enter into a

closer relationship with him, and to experience the peace and joy that comes from such a friendship.

For every baptized Christian, this is our fundamental vocation: to follow Jesus Christ as fully as possible, to grow in our knowledge and love for him, and to imitate his example of humble service to one another.

There are, of course, many other vocations that flow from this overarching fundamental vocation that we all have as Christians. The challenge is how to recognize at any given point in one's life, what it is that we're being called to be or to do as followers of Christ. The unsettled times we live in make this a greater challenge than ever. I thought it might be helpful if I shared a bit of my own experience in this regard, particularly my experience of being called to serve as a deacon.

To begin, I must say that Jesus has never appeared to me as he did to Peter and Andrew and James and John. Nor have I ever been thrown to the ground, as was the Apostle Paul, and heard the voice of Jesus telling me to go to Damascus and await further instructions. My experiences with Jesus have been much quieter and more subtle. The story of Elijah is closer to my story. Elijah was told by the Lord to stand on a mountain and wait for the Lord to pass by. He did so, and soon a heavy wind came, but the Lord was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, and then a fire, but the Lord was in neither of these. Finally, Elijah heard a tiny whispering sound, which he recognized as the voice of the Lord. For me, the call to be a deacon began as a tiny whispering sound. I recall

being in Church one Sunday with my wife Dorothy and our three sons when it suddenly occurred to me that the Church could use some help. I felt called to contribute in some way to the life of the Church, and to share the faith that was so important in my life. Not long after that I became a lector at my parish.

As a lector I spent more time reading sacred scripture. I had a small paperback version of the New Testament and once I came upon a letter to Timothy, which speaks about various ministries in the Church, including that of deacon. At some point I heard that the Church had restored the ministry of permanent deacons, and that married men who were 35 years or older could serve as deacons. My curiosity was piqued, but not enough to do anything about it. Moreover, I didn't know, and had never even seen, any permanent deacons in the parishes I attended.

One day after Mass, the pastor at my parish stopped me and asked if I'd ever thought about being a deacon. I said the thought had crossed my mind, but I figured it was something for older men. At the time I was in my late 40s, and I didn't feel like looking into the diaconate.

But not long after that, I happened to meet a man at a neighboring parish whom I liked a lot and who was a deacon. What surprised me, though, was that he was at least ten years younger than me and he was already a deacon! I later came to see this encounter as an example of God's grace overcoming one of my reservations about looking into the possibility of being a deacon.

After that, I began to feel a strong pull toward entering the formation program for those aspiring to become permanent deacons. And so I did, in 1998, when I was 50 years old. Four years later, in September 2002, on the feast of the Holy Cross, I was ordained a permanent deacon.

Ideally, deacons are meant to remind us of the importance of service to others, and to help us follow the example that Jesus gave at the Last Supper by washing the feet of the apostles and telling them to do likewise. Among the things that deacons do are baptizing people, presiding at weddings, proclaiming the Gospel at Mass, and preaching on occasion.

There are many opportunities for each of you, both men and women, to serve as well. Christ still calls each one of us to follow him today, just as he did when he came upon Peter and the others on the shore at the Sea of Galilee. How we live out that call depends on many things, including the talents we have been given and the circumstances of our life at any particular time. There's a booklet that describes the various ministries in the parishes of Our Lady's and Sacred Heart. I invite you to take one and consider whether you're called to serve in any of them. Consider, too, whether you are being called, as a follower of Christ, to respond to any of the serious civic and social challenges of our time. Pope Francis has highlighted some of these by his actions and his writings about the poor, about refugees, and about the environment.

For those men who may be intrigued by the priesthood, Fr. Dan Hennessey, the director for priestly vocations, will be conducting retreats the weekend of February 10th at both St. John's Seminary in Brighton and at Pope St. John the XXIII Seminary in Weston. Any of our parish priests would also be glad to speak with you. Also, new formation classes start every September for permanent deacons, and I would be glad to speak personally with anyone who would like to know more about that. Women interested in the religious life may speak with Sr. Marian Batho, a member of our parish. Finally, we are blessed to have both women and men serving as Pastoral Associates, and you should feel free to speak with any of our Pastoral Associates about their calls to serve in this critical role in today's Church.

There is a well-known Psalm that encourages us to follow the Lord with these words: "If today you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts." In my experience, God typically speaks to us in whispers, not in shouts. So take some time this week to sit quietly in prayer and listen to hear if the Lord isn't calling you to something new and exciting.

Deacon Bill Koffel