

“WHO’S ON THE BUS?”

Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23

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I shall never forget the Sunday after New Year’s Day in 1992. We were taking down the Christmas decorations, and I was on a ladder taking the star off the top of the tree. The telephone rang. That was not unusual in our parsonage. My wife Barb answered the phone. “It’s for you,” she said. “It’s Bishop Boulton.” “Bishop Boulton,” I repeated as I climbed down the ladder. Bishop Boulton? You need to understand that bishops do not call just to chat. I was serving a medium-sized church and frankly had never received a phone call from a bishop before. Not for any reason. Not ever. As calmly as I could, I answered the phone. After some awkward responses to pleasantries, I listened carefully as the Bishop said, “Charlie, I’m wondering if you and your wife could have lunch with me on Tuesday.” Well, of course, the answer was “yes,” but the question was: what did he want? “Perhaps he wants me to chair a Conference committee,” I speculated out loud. “Dad,” said my son Timothy, who was 13 at the time and has inherited his mother’s and his grandmother’s intuition, “He wants us to move! Why else would the Bishop be calling?”

Well, as it turned out, Tim was right. The bishop met Barb and me for lunch at a nice restaurant in Cuyahoga Falls and proceeded to share that he needed two new District Superintendents, and that he wanted me to be one of them. “I have looked at all the pastors’ profiles,” he said, “And you are my first choice.”

Now those of you who come from non-United Methodist backgrounds need to know that pastors are not really given a choice as to where they will serve, in the sense that we find a nice church and then ask the bishop if we can go there. Nor do congregations interview a number of pastors and then vote. That’s not how it works. The bishop and the District Superintendents take a look at the needs of the churches and the gifts and abilities of the pastors, and make the best matches they can. It’s kind of like Fiddler on the Roof. The matchmaker decides who should marry who. In traditional society, the happy couple doesn’t have too much to say about it.

After prayer and a family meeting, I said, “Yes” to Bishop Boulton. I believed, and I still believe that I was saying “yes” to God as well. We had six wonderful years on the Mansfield District, and I learned so much about the church and the wonderful people who were part of the 71 congregations I served. Our move did not come without some sacrifice. We had to leave a congregation and a community we loved. The kids had to change schools. Barb had to give up her job and find another. We were further from grandparents. But we made the commitment when I was ordained that we would go where sent, and so the whole family said goodbye to Church Hill United Methodist Church in Youngstown and moved to Mansfield.

For the next six years, I was part of the process of asking (read strongly encouraging; forcing would be a bit too strong of a word) United Methodist pastors to move. I had to meet with committees and tell them that their pastor was leaving. I had to find replacement pastors and had to meet with pastors and tell them that the bishop wanted them to move. I helped both pastors and congregations through the transition. Usually I was involved in salary negotiations, housing issues, and the details of benefit packages. I would receive phone calls and letters of acclamation when the matches went well. I would receive phone calls and letters of frustration

and anger when they did not. During those six years I presided over more than seventy moves, some happy occasions, some difficult, mostly bittersweet moments as pastors retired, were promoted, or changed careers for a variety of reasons. In every case, church life, community life was disrupted, and families were forced to make transitions, which are always challenging and energy consuming.

The question you may be asking is this: “Why does the United Methodist church move its pastors? Why not leave well enough alone?” Well, the answer is that when we follow where God leads, sometimes God’s call involves change.

In his book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins has a chapter on “Getting the right people on the bus.”(1) He says that in order for any organization or institution to move forward, you have to have the right personnel. “*Who’s on the bus?*” becomes a critical question. Getting the right people on the bus is a major agenda for the leader or CEO of any organization. As church leaders, the bishop and District Superintendents seek to listen and analyze the needs of congregations, then seek to find the best pastor for each church. This is done with much prayer and concern, both for the pastor and the congregations who need leadership.

When Jesus came into Galilee with the intent of continuing the ministry begun by John the Baptist, his message was summarized in one sentence, “*Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.*” This was the same message that John had preached. Now John was in prison because of that message, and would soon be executed. Preaching this message was not something to be taken lightly or in a cavalier manner. It was serious business.

Jesus realized that his life, too, was in danger, as he enlisted disciples, those who would help him, those who would be able to go where he would not be able to go with God’s message of salvation. The story, most of you know it well, is that Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee when he saw two fishermen: Simon Peter and Andrew, his brother. Although the Bible doesn’t say, Jesus had probably had previous conversation with these two fisherman. “What does it mean to repent?” Peter probably asked him. “Just exactly what is this Kingdom of God that you are talking about?” asked Andrew. “Isn’t your message a threat to imperial Rome? Some people seem to think it is.”

I have never been to the Sea of Galilee, but I shall never forget those afternoons I spent in Kuşadası, Turkey, sitting on a large rock overlooking the Aegean Sea. Barb was presenting at a nursing conference, but I was on the shore with my notebook, feeling inspired to watch the fishing boats in the lake, much as they were in the days of Jesus. Neither the method of fishing nor the type of boat has changed much in 2000 years, nor has the call of Jesus.

“*Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.*” Then comes the showstopper, for the Bible says that immediately they left their nets and followed him. Then Jesus went down the shore and saw another pair of brothers: James and John. Again he said, “*Follow me.*” Again these young men left their boat and the fishing business of their father Zebedee, that they were sure to inherit, and followed Jesus.

Scholars question whether they really just walked away that fast. After all, fishing was one of the major sources of wealth in Galilee. Sometimes the disciples are characterized as ne’er-do-wells from the lower rungs of society. But these four were respectable, middle-class businessmen with responsible jobs. One of the things that modern scholarship is discovering is that these Bible stories are invested with much more meaning than sometimes meets the eye. By calling disciples from some of the most prosperous businesses in Galilee, Jesus was potentially causing economic upheaval in the town. His new kingdom will offer a radically different economic model, with different goals than the model understood by Zebedee and company. His call of these fishermen symbolizes that shift in thinking.

“From now on, you will be fishing for people,” says Jesus. The Gospel wastes little time in exploring what that will mean. His was a ministry of **teaching, preaching and healing**, and Jesus expects his disciples to follow suit. First and foremost, Jesus was a teacher. It is no accident that in Christian art we often see pictures of Jesus on the hillside with crowds gathered around him. He taught not only by lecture, but by example. Not only did he say “Love one another,” he demonstrated that love by placing a child on his knee, by going out of his way to help the least and the lost, and by restoring dignity to the lives of those others wrote off as insignificant. It is no accident that a majority of the space at Church of the Saviour is devoted to classrooms. Teaching people about God is the major agenda of the Christian church. It is no accident that the United Methodist Church has started more colleges and universities than any other denomination. We believe in education. The staff and I were privileged this last week to attend the Large Church Initiative of the United Methodist Church in Orlando, Florida., thanks to a generous grant from Church of the Saviour Foundation. As part of the Conference, we heard the Bethune-Cookman College Choir. Bethune-Cookman College for over 100 years has been educating African-Americans — first women, now both men and women — helping them to realize God’s potential for their lives. From day one, Jesus’ disciples have been called to a teaching ministry.

Fishing for people also involves preaching or proclamation. It was St. Francis who said, “Preach always. Use words when necessary.” Certainly our lives are our most effective sermons, but sometimes we need to use words. Jesus was not shy about his message. We should not be shy, either. We must be tactful, for our words can do more harm than good if we are not careful. But we cannot keep our light under a bushel, but let it shine so that all can see. Are you proclaiming your faith? As a disciple of Jesus Christ, that’s what you are called to do.

Teaching and preaching are obvious responses to the message of Jesus. The third plank of the job description is healing. Here in Cleveland, in the midst of one of the foremost medical communities in the world, I want to say that I believe all healing is faith healing and that all healing comes from God. I believe that God uses prayer, God uses doctors and nurses and health professionals to heal people, even when they are unaware or do not acknowledge God’s presence and power. There are so many broken hearts, wounded spirits, bruised egos in our world today. As followers of Jesus we are called to do what we can to bring healing and reconciliation to a broken and suffering world. Never has there been a greater need for healing and wholeness than right here, right now.

The call that came to Peter, Andrew, James and John is the call that comes to us. Most of us, like these four men are middle class, responsible people who are gainfully employed. I firmly believe that the same words that Jesus spoke to them he speaks to us today: “Follow me. Leave your nets behind, for from now on you will be fishing for people.”

Does that mean that every true Christian is expected to walk away from his or her day job and go to seminary and enter the ordained ministry and agree to go wherever the bishop sends you? No, I don’t think so. I firmly believe that Christ calls all of us to follow him, but that God does not intend that every Christian become an ordained pastor. In your secular jobs, some of you can reach people and influence decision-making processes in ways that the clergy will never be able to do. I am convinced that God has a job for each of us, a unique role for us to fulfill, and that we will not be completely satisfied or content in life until we are living up to our potential and doing what God wants us to do. For some, this will involve a career change. For others it will not. But the call to leave our nets means that we must be willing to give up whatever stands between us and total commitment to Jesus Christ. When we yield ourselves to him, we never know where that commitment and call will take us.

Sometimes in popular Christian language we talk about taking Jesus with us, as though we can put him in our back pockets and go about our daily routine. Christian symbols, such as little crosses, are popular items to put in our pockets as a reminder that God is always with us. Now, of course, I believe that God is always with us, always by our side. The Psalmist reminds us that there is nowhere in the universe we can go that is outside the realm of God's love and care. But we should not act as though we are free to do as we please, and that Christ will come along for the ride. It is not that we take Jesus where we want to go, it is Jesus who takes us. If we follow Jesus, there are times when we will end up in places and in situations we never would have dreamed of on our own.

The story is told of a French pastor and his congregation in the perilous years of the Nazi occupation who organized to save the lives of thousands of Jews. The congregation hid them in secret shelters and in their homes. This small congregation realized that their ultimate allegiance was not to the government, but to God. Hear this conversation:

“Church Official: What I want to say is this: you stop helping refugees. Pastor: Do you realize what you are asking? These people, especially the Jews, are in very great danger. If we do not shelter them or take them across the mountains to Switzerland, they may well die. Church Official: What you are doing is endangering the very existence not only of this village but of the Protestant church of France! You must stop helping them. Pastor: If we stop, many of them will starve to death, die of exposure, or be deported and killed. We cannot stop. Church Official: You must stop. The marshal will take care of them. He will see to it that they are not hurt. Pastor: No.”(2)

Faithfulness to Jesus Christ means a willingness if necessary to go against all conventional wisdom, all cultural assumptions and all human authority. This congregation became convinced that it had to follow the same path that Jesus himself walked. Are we?

“Follow me,” says Jesus, “And I will make you fish for people.” I’m not sure just exactly what he has in mind for you, but I do know this: **God wants you on the bus!** He wants you to follow where he leads..

Notes:

1. Collins, Jim. *Good to Great*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001., p. 44.
2. Quoted in *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 36. No.1., p. 20.