

3rd Sunday A (Matthew 4:12-23)

Empathy is a wonderful virtue whereby we try to put ourselves in the shoes of another, and attempt to share an experience of another. Often, this is very difficult, but the exercise of empathy enables us to become more understanding and compassionate toward another. Let's take a look at Zebedee in today's Gospel and try to get into his shoes. He was the father of James and John. Vocationally, Zebedee was a fisherman and so were his two sons. They had grown up and joined their father in the family business. Their relationship was disrupted one day by a carpenter from the village of Nazareth. The two boys were in their boat with their father, ready to go fishing. Then Jesus came along and invited James and John to go with him and join him in his work. And Matthew says, "Immediately they abandoned boat and father to follow him."

How do you think Zebedee felt about that? I think he was deeply troubled to have his two boys, successful fisherman, taken away from him by a wandering carpenter who had given up his trade to become an itinerant preacher. I'm sure he must have thought that his sons had made a foolish choice. From our perspective two thousand years later, we know that they made an excellent choice to follow Jesus. And so the questioning mind of Zebedee endures today. Why would anyone follow Jesus? Why would one give up so much to follow him?

In a way, Zebedee reminds me of others, parents or friends, who may present objections to young men and women entering the priesthood or religious life, responding to a call from that same attractive itinerant preacher. As a high school senior, one of my girl friends told me I wasn't the type to become a Jesuit. I began to wonder what the right type for the religious life was. My father, like Zebedee, found it difficult to understand my abandoning him, and perhaps his business as well.

What is so attractive about a close following of Jesus? All Jesus says is "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of people." That's the only contact the disciples had with him. Yet they drop everything and follow him. He hadn't preached to them or taught them anything at the time of their calling. Obviously, the Gospel is emphasizing that discipleship is not a commitment to an idea or an ideology. Discipleship is a commitment to the person of Jesus. He is no ordinary person, and a disciple, even if the attraction can't be explained, knows that there is something very special about this person and it can't be reduced to preaching or teaching. It's a personal relationship of the deepest kind.

In the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius speaks to us about the importance of the three stages of growth in coming to know Christ. In our prayer, we come to know him more intimately with a deeper interior knowledge. Growing to know him more intimately, our love for him deepens for the one who knows us better than we know ourselves, and who loves us to the very core of our being. And thus, we are empowered to serve him in our brothers and sisters more generously. The key to any Christian discipleship is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship he eagerly desires to share with us, for he is passionately in love with us. And thus, he feeds us with the greatest form of intimacy, his very self at the table of the Eucharist. And with grateful hearts we give thanks.

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