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Just a bit to the left  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
February 9, 2025  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 5:1-11

[image: cat listening to radio]

Does anyone here like listening to preachers on the radio? When I was wrapping up my ministry in Mimico and preparing for a ministry in Rexdale, I decided I should listen to “Christian Radio” in the car when I could. I’m not sure exactly why I did it. But something about the language that was used by their search committee during my interviews suggested to me that my next congregation took a more classic/traditional outlook on the Bible and faith. so I figured I’d better learn some new language before I showed up. And I figured that listening to radio preachers might be helpful.

Whether that was a sensible idea or not, I did learn a few things in the process. I learned that radio preachers preach long sermons. Actually, in truth I think they preach short sermons multiple times without sitting down in between. They believe in the technique of repetition to drive their points home. Radio preachers generally try to engage with people’s emotions. But at a very vague level. Which is only fair because they don’t know who is listening to them. But what I learned most of all from listening to radio preachers is that all the sermons ended with the same punch line. I mean, sure, there were variations of that. But the exciting, dramatic, conclusion to every single sermon was some version of “give your life to Jesus”. Or, “give your heart to Jesus”. Or “put your faith in Jesus”. And the more sermons I heard, the more I started to really dislike that ending.

To be clear, it’s not that I disagree with those statements. I agree fully that we should give our hearts to Jesus. Absolutely. That’s not my problem. My problem is that “give your heart to Jesus” is a metaphor. And I think that preachers should help us all figure out what we actually need to do in more concrete terms. I don’t think that ending a reflection with a metaphor is helpful enough.

[image: concrete topics]

That’s why I have preached on a variety of concrete topics here. Including the

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need to stop recycling for the sake of the environment. The need to stop eating so many animals. The need to fight racism. The need to consider deeply our human attraction to war. The need for us to manage our own self-care better. The need to understand inclusion and diversity at a deeper level. The need to work to reduce climate change. And other topics that some of you might have thought had no place in a church. But for me, it is all an effort to put actual flesh on the metaphor “give your heart to Jesus”. It’s an attempt to talk about making actual, possible, doable life changes to help be and bring the kingdom of God to the here and now. It’s about everybody finding their own healing. Here and now.

Some weeks, given the biblical texts and what is happening on our streets, that task can be fairly easy. But many times, it is not. And it really does not help that many of us have heard these biblical stories so many times. Because we are perhaps used to hearing these stories and letting them roll off our backs thinking that the stories cannot possibly apply to us.

Take our reading from Luke today - Jesus calls fishers to follow him. The obvious take-home message is stay away from beaches, so that Jesus will not annoy you by asking you for anything. Well, that’s a literal reading of the text anyway. But if the message is just, “stay away from beaches”, we may as well have just watched the movie Jaws. Surely in the church we can do better than that!

[image: fishing with nets]

The story of Jesus calling the fishers is a well-known and well-loved story. In the Bible, there are actually 3 versions of the story. Because the story is in all 3 synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We just read the version from Luke, which I think is the far better story. And I want to tell you why.

In both Matthew and Mark, ... well, let me read you the entire story from Mark 1. “As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake - for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed Jesus.” (Mark 1:16-18). That’s the entire story in Mark. And the story in Matthew is basically the same, but with more words. Moreover, in Mathew and Mark this story comes very early

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in the gospels. In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus is baptized, he retreats into the wilderness to be tempted for 40 days. And as soon as Jesus emerges from the wilderness - after a very brief preamble - Jesus calls the fishers as his first disciples. Jesus calls fishers and they follow. Instantly. Without question. Without hesitation.

In both Matthew and Mark it sounds as if Jesus was a completely unknown person who wanders down a random beach, tells some random fishers to leave their boats and follow him. And they do. The fishers do not deliberate. They do not ask Jesus who he is or what his credentials are. They do not ask what the pay is like. They do not even ask Jesus how long he wants them for? Does Jesus want them for an hour? Or the rest of the day? Or a year? Who knows? They just follow.

[image: blind faith]

This has led to countless sermons where the preacher said that this story is about following Jesus blindly on faith. The call to follow Jesus is a leap of faith, not something that we can be rational about. Right?

And you know I have a problem with that interpretation. For me, faith can be rational. Christianity can actually be largely rational. Your's does not have to be, of course. But I am still a scientist at heart.

[image: rational christianity]

In case you have not discovered this yourself already, I have a podcast is called "Rational Christianity". Christianity can be rational.

For me, the call to check our brains at the door and blindly follow Jesus is not something that I endorse. Because I have a big problem with that. OK - 2 problems. Well, I guess it's actually 3 problems. I'm going to stop counting now.

[image: acting on a whim]

One problem is that if we are called to blind faith does that just mean we should act on any whim that strikes us, imagining that the whim is from God? I mean, even if we accept the challenge of "blind faith", how exactly do we know which of our whims come from God? I get a lot of whims and many of them I guarantee do not come from God. How do we decide which whims to act on?

[image: sleeping through sermon]

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A second problem is that when we hear the message about being called to blind faith, most of us tune out. Because we really don't know how to do that. As a metaphor it's fine, but we struggle to imagine any real action based on the idea of blind faith. Our lives are complicated enough already. We have families, responsibilities, and bills to pay after all. Hearing a call to blind faith actually lets us off the hook, because we can decide that the message cannot possibly apply to us.

A third problem is that there is no reason to be irrational here anyway. The fishers following Jesus was not a leap of faith. How do I know that? We just need to read Luke's version of the story of Jesus calling the fishers, add a bit of context, and the story will actually make a lot of sense.

And that's why I think the version in Luke is a much better story. Luke's version does not require a leap of faith. And because of that - spoiler alert - we are not let off the hook either! Luke's version of the story of Jesus calling the fishers might just apply to us after all. You've been warned.

[image: Jesus calls fishers]

As with any good story, the story starts before the story starts. As I said, in Mark and Matthew, Jesus calls the fishers immediately after his time in the wilderness. In Luke, after his wilderness experience Jesus does not call the fishers - not right away. In Luke, after his wilderness experience Jesus travels around the country teaching in different synagogues. Then Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit. Then Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law. Then Jesus continues to preach throughout Judea. His preaching is provocative enough that he even gets run out of town sometimes, as he read in our story last week. So we know Jesus was doing something meaningful. Then - after all that - Jesus calls the fishers, as we just read a moment ago.

So in Luke's story, by the time Jesus gets around to calling the fishers, Jesus is already a known public figure who had already been teaching and healing. More than that. The fishers were actually already Jesus's friends.

So here's a more rational way to tell this story. The story actually starts with the baptism of Jesus. Jesus went to John the baptizer and was baptized. But John had his own disciples. John already had his own little group of followers. Jesus became part of that

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group. Jesus was initially one of John's disciples. Over time Jesus became a well-known and trusted member of John's group. Then, John was arrested. And after John was arrested, Jesus took over the leadership of John's group. And over time, Jesus took the group in a new direction. And over time, John's disciples became disciples of Jesus.

So when Jesus visited the fishers - his friends who were busy at work - and Jesus called them to follow, they did. But this was not a leap of faith - at all. Jesus's friends likely anticipated that Jesus would take over from John after John was arrested. It was not a leap of faith. It was probably not even a surprise.

Why do we care about this? Is anything going to come out of this that makes that long preamble worthwhile? I have no idea. But I'll tell you why I care about this. And I hope that by the end, you will care too.

I care about this because it completely changes the metaphor of the story. The story of "calling the fishers" is not a call to abandon rational thought and embrace blind faith. Jesus was not calling unknown fishers into an unknown project. Jesus was calling the fishers (who were already his friends) to continue the ministry that they were already doing together. Yes, over time to take it in a new direction. But to build on an existing ministry. Jesus called his friends to continue, to adapt and to grow. Not to start something new from scratch.

Jesus was calling his friends to make incremental changes to their collective ministry because John was no longer around. And Jesus starts by making an incremental change to their method of fishing. Jesus tells the fishers - who already knew what they were doing - to go out into deeper waters in order to find fish. The fishers - because they already trust Jesus - do so. And they find more fish than they can handle.

The fishers made a very small change. And they were successful. And we are called to do the same.

Between the pandemic and the amalgamation, this congregation has been through a lot. We changed again 14 months ago when I joined with you in ministry. I know that the last thing anyone wants right now is more change.

But the pandemic and our amalgamation are both now in our past. Even if some effects still linger. And like the fishers - we too are being called into deeper waters.

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[image: just a bit to the left]

The title of this sermon is “Just a bit to the left. What did you think I was going to be talking about? What were you hoping I would talk about?

[image: drill bit for left holes]

Were you thinking about a drill bit that would let you drill a hole to the left?

[image: arithmetic bit shift]

Were you thinking about a computer algorithm for modifying the bit patterns in an integer?

Well, I hope that some of you were thinking more along these lines.

[image: high way road wiggles]

We are on a journey. Together. And we continue to move forward. We just need to do a little wiggle. We just need to go a bit to the left. We need incremental changes in our ministries in order to make sure they remain effective. True, there may be some completely new project at some point we want to try that requires bigger change. But I suspect that most of the changes that we need to make are incremental, small, doable, possible. We just need to go a bit to the left.

Whatever the metaphor “give your heart to Jesus” means to you it is may not be a call to do something completely new and off the wall. We do not need to look for insane new ideas that we do not actually want to do. We just need to be open to incremental changes that lead to new opportunities in this congregation, our communities, and in our own lives. Opportunities that are only just a bit beyond our grasp today.

We do not need blind faith. We don’t need blindness at all. In fact we need to open our eyes and hearts to the needs of our community and ourselves.

What excites you about CITP and your own neighbourhood right now? But don’t tell me now. This sermon will conclude on March 9, at our Annual General Meeting. Come to that meeting prepared to share what we are called to do - and who we are called to be - in 2025. But you probably don’t have to think really big. You might want to think just a bit to the left.

*Amen.*