

## “Come, Follow Me Home: Commitment”

### Matthew 8:18-27

Reading the Bible story for today in light of my recent trips to California to help with the health struggles and burials of my mom and dad, I am grateful to know a little more of the background of this story. Jesus’ words, “Let the dead bury their dead,” may seem like a judgment on those of us who prioritize taking care of sick or dying family members and having to take time away from engaged ministry.

Here is an explanation of the cultural context behind Jesus’ words. According to New Testament Scholar Craig Keener: “Many considered honoring parents a son’s greatest obligation (e.g., Josephus Against Apion 2.206), and burying them was the greatest expression of that obligation (cf., e.g., Tobit 4:3-4; 6:15; 4 Maccabees 16:11). The obligation fell most heavily on the eldest son. To neglect this duty was unthinkable; it would make one an outcast from the extended family and dishonored in one’s village, normally for the rest of one’s life. But a son whose father had just died would not normally be out talking with a rabbi; on receiving news of the father’s death, he would immediately see to the father’s burial. Some scholars note that, ‘I must first bury my father’ sometimes functions as a polite request for delay until the father dies, sometimes a delay of years so the son can continue with filial obligations in the meantime. Others suggest that this son refers to secondary burial, the custom of reburying the father’s bones a year after the initial burial. On either of these views, the son could be requesting a considerable delay.” Commitment is at the heart of this encounter with Jesus. In the first encounter with the scribe, Jesus was warning him of the risk involved and the hard lifestyle. When the second man, a disciple no less, asked Jesus to go bury his father, we are already aware that Jesus was talking about a high-risk venture that required a lot of commitment, especially that he was about to head to Jerusalem.

In preparation for their time in Jerusalem, Jesus wanted his followers to know that his confrontation with the authorities would test them like never before. All their security and control would be gone and thus their commitment needed to be solid. Jesus did not sugarcoat the discipleship path.

Immediately after these tough conversations, the disciples find themselves in a storm. The disciples act in fear. They are panicking while Jesus was asleep. Imagine the scene. There is a storm, and everyone is shouting and trying to bail water out of the boat, but Jesus is asleep. They literally had to wake him up. Jesus was showing a level of faith and trust that the disciples could not even begin to imagine. Then he sternly rebukes them, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?”

This second part of our Bible reading for today is very important as it helps us to see that the level of commitment in discipleship is directly connected to our level of trust in God’s care for us. Even though the path of discipleship does not take us out of the storms of life and sometimes it seems to take us right into them, God is with us in all of them and that is enough.

Jesus had to teach these lessons of faith so many times and in so many different ways, because nurturing a commitment that comes from a place of faith takes time and practice. Commitment takes resilience because we have to stay with it especially when things get tough.

And so today, I would like to invite us to consider our commitment to discipleship through the image of the boat. In order to grow in discipleship, commitment, and resilience, we have to look at our experiences in the storms of life when our boats seem to be on the edge of destruction.

1. **Jesus is in the Boat:** Remembering that Jesus is in the boat with us is a very important part of the journey. We are not left on our own. Jesus knows the struggles of our lives. Even if Jesus seems to be asleep, we are to have faith.
2. **The Other Disciples:** We are not alone when we suffer. We have a community of disciples who struggle and help us through. The beauty of a community of disciples is that others around us can offer us support, understanding, and prayer. One of the ways Jesus works in the world is through his disciples. They are often his hands and feet. I can't begin to tell you how true this has been in my life recently in dealing with the cancer storm that has engulfed my family.
3. **Faith:** This is about not running away when life gets hard. It is about learning to see God in the hardships even when the outcome is unclear, and the path is hard. This is especially important for a life of deep joy and abundance. Our emotional programs for happiness tell us to run or to control, but faith helps us to know that life is about focusing on the love of the one who leads the journey.

What builds our commitment and resilience is not finding shortcuts or easy ways to live but learning to live in the heart and in the sacred, even when that means more pain and more vulnerability. We don't run from loss, from grief, or from fear. We instead learn to access God's love in such times.

We are going to use Rembrandt's famous painting of this story, "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee," for a time of reflection. Rembrandt painted this in 1633. The following is adapted from Bill Gaultiere. His painting of Jesus and his disciples in their boat on the stormy sea is dark, shrouded in shadows, but there is a ray of light streaming down to help us see what is going on in the boat. Let's take a few moments for quiet reflection on the painting. What do you notice? What part of the painting or character in it does God especially draw your attention to? Quietly pray and reflect on this for a couple of minutes. Now we will move into finding ourselves in the painting. An interesting thing about the painting is that in addition to the twelve disciples who accompanied Jesus in the boat there is a thirteenth person sailing in the boat. Who is that? Rembrandt is known to have painted himself somewhere in his paintings. He's setting an example for us to find ourselves in the Gospel, bringing to God our stress and our brokenness, our hurts and our hopes. In Rembrandt's painting each of the people with Jesus in the boat has their own reaction to the storm. It's something like the different roles that people play in a family, church, or other group. (Sometimes, particularly under stress, people's roles and reactions may be very dysfunctional!) Which person do you most identify with? (In

different situations or at different times in your life you might find that you have a different reaction.)

### **On Top**

The man in the bow of the ship is on top, riding the huge wave. He's a leader and a professional fisherman who is focused on his work earnestly trimming the front sail. Perhaps it's an adventure for him. Or maybe he's just working hard at his job.

### **Fixing the Problem**

Three of the men (probably experienced fishermen also) are at the mast working frantically to fix the main sail. The gale winds have ripped it and snapped the metal wire so that the boom is disconnected from the mast.

### **Barely Hanging On!**

The huge wave is pounding the man on the left in the middle, and he is hanging on to a guywire for dear life!

### **Afraid**

Most of the crew seem afraid, but especially the man on the right side of the boat. He is crouched over and looking with dread at the enormous wave that is swamping the boat. We can almost feel him trembling with anxiety.

### **Sick**

On the lower left in back is a distressed man with his hand on his forehead and leaning over the side of the boat. It seems he's about to throw up.

### **Angry at God**

Two disciples appear angry at Jesus for sleeping in their storm. One shakes him awake and the other raises his voice, "Teacher! Don't you care if we drown!"

### **Quiet and Alone**

On the lower left of the boat is a man in white that is easy to miss. His back is faced to us. He's sitting still and alone. He seems to be separated from the frightening storm and the chaos going on around him in the boat. There seems to be a shadowy figure that he's looking at. Is he having a vision? Is it an angel?

### **Lost**

A man in a blue shirt on the left side of the boat near the back is standing and holding onto a guywire. His other hand is on his forehead as he stares blankly out at the dark sea. Maybe he's flooded with emotion and shut down. It almost seems he is looking to us. He's close to Jesus but he's not looking at him.

### **Worshipping the Lord**

No one is looking at Jesus, except the two angry disciples and the disciple kneeling at Jesus' feet. Only the kneeling disciple is looking at Jesus with trust and reverence.

Rembrandt has painted a halo on this disciple's head to signify his faith in the Lord Jesus in the midst of the terrible storm.

### **At the Helm**

There is one more person in the boat with Jesus. In the stern, at the very back, is the disciple at the helm, holding the tiller. He must be another experienced fisherman because he's in charge of the boat. Perhaps this is Peter. He is responsible to guide the boat's course and instruct the crew on what they need to do. Maybe his hands are tightly gripping the tiller because he's been straining to keep control of the boat? Maybe now he's just holding the tiller because he sees his friend kneeling and his attention has been drawn to Christ the Lord?

### **Pray About Your Storm**

Now, bring your storm (or the world's storms) into the Gospel story. Some storms that we experience, like this one on the Sea of Galilee are dangerous. Other are storms of stress or not knowing what to do. Your storm might be a difficulty in your family, work, or ministry. Or something personal that you're struggling with. How are you dealing with your storm? Which character in Rembrandt's painting do you identify with? Pray quietly about this or turn to your neighbor to share with them about it and we will end this time in prayer...Amen.