

What's your Net Worth?
A Sermon for January 22, 2017
Matthew 4:18-22
Lansdowne UMC

When I was 11 years old, I had an experience that I'll never forget. One school night, my sister and I hopped in the car with my Dad and drove to DC. He took us down to the old Executive office building, where we were met by a white house staffer that my Dad had gotten connected to through a co-worker. He led us through the security there, and then through a tunnel. The next thing I knew, we were in the West Wing of the White House. The West Wing, of course, is the business area of the white house where the day-to-day work gets done.

Now, I don't what the situation has been lately, but at the time, since the West Wing is a busy office during the day, the only way to get a tour of the West Wing was to be invited by White House staffer willing to lead you on an after-hours tour.

Since that was precisely what we had, I ended up being in places that I would have had no right to be if it weren't for our guide. I stood behind the podium in the press room. I went into the cabinet room. We walked outside in the rose garden. When we were out there, I have a vivid memory of looking onto the west colonnade and seeing Socks, the Clinton's cat, out on a late night prowl. That was the closest we got to seeing a member of the first family. Except, perhaps, from when I was able to stick my head through the cracked door into the holy of holies-- the oval office.

Now, of course, I didn't have any right to be there by myself. I only had the privilege to be there because I was with someone who belonged there. Someone who sacrificed his evening to do a favor for a

family friend-- a favor that I would never be able to reciprocate. And for me, this trip to the White House was an opportunity for me to learn that old life lesson: "it's not what you know, it's who you know." Or as we might say these days, it's about who's in your social network.

Not to get too ahead of ourselves, but isn't that what it's like when Jesus calls us to enter the kingdom of heaven-- the kingdom of God. Jesus is God's Son. If any human being belongs in the house of the Lord, it's him. And Jesus is throwing a party, and he's sending out invitations to all kinds of people who don't deserve to be there. Check out who Jesus calls. Let's just read it again starting at verse 18

18 As Jesus walked alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. 19 "Come, follow me," he said, "and I'll show you how to fish for people." 20 Right away, they left their nets and followed him. 21 Continuing on, he saw another set of brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with Zebedee their father repairing their nets. Jesus called them and 22 immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Who does Jesus call first? He calls fishermen. Later he'll have Matthew, a tax collector. He'll even have Simon the Zealot-- perhaps a member of a political party of revolutionaries. They're not society's elites. They're probably not the great speakers. They're not necessarily the smartest. Honestly, they might have already been rejected as disciples by other Rabbis. But it's not what you know it's who you know. Or maybe it's not what you know, but it's who knows you.

So from the beginning, some of Jesus' most effective disciples have been relative nobodies. I think that's some good news. Take Francis Asbury as a more modern example. He was born to working class parents in England. He wasn't formally educated. He apprenticed as a metal worker. But at 14, he made a commitment to Christ, and got connected with the Methodists. By the time he was 22, he was a Methodist lay preacher. Then, 4 years later, he offered himself to be sent to America as a missionary. Asbury travelled some 265,000 miles on horseback. Under Asbury's leadership, the number of Methodists in America grew from 1,200 to 114,000 members.¹ A completely normal person can get led to extraordinary places by knowing Jesus and responding to Jesus' call.

Jesus doesn't call Peter, Andrew, James, and John to be his followers because they're fantastic at their current job. In fact, it doesn't seem to have anything to do with it. As it turns out, being a fisherman does make a great analogy for being a disciple, though. And so Jesus uses it. "I'll show you how to fish for people," he says.

You know that the proverb "it's not what you know, it's who you know" applies to the world of careers especially well? As a government employee right out of college, I don't think I fully appreciated this until recently, but apparently most jobs are not published in job listings. That means that the majority of people who get work are getting it because they someone in their social network-- a friend or a friend of a friend has a position to fill or can put in a good word to an employer.

Jesus doesn't wait for people to apply to be his disciples either. He goes out and finds them. They don't have to be trained for the work already, because Jesus himself is going to teach them. Their only job is to respond to Jesus' call. At some point, they might need to lay down

¹ Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAkaY93dCJI>

their lives for Jesus. But at the moment, it's enough just to lay down their nets.

Those of us that do work for the church probably see the modern analogy for the mission work that we do as a church. I mean that just as we get our day jobs from people we know, we get most of our Christian work from people we know as well. I could spell this out more, but I'll simply say the name Betty Cain, and I think most of you will know what I mean.

You're gonna grone when you hear how I'm tying this all together. When Jesus calls James and John, they are working on their nets. They leave their work on their nets-- their *net-work* to join up with a new *network* of Jesus followers.

It's a wordplay that provides us with a helpful image for what being disciple of Jesus means. Disciples aren't simply signing on for private study sessions with Jesus, though they'll get that. Disciples aren't studying to become go-it-alone heroes. They're becoming "LinkedIn", if you will, with other followers of Jesus.

Being a follower of Jesus isn't about knowing the right things. It isn't even ultimately about believing the right things or doing the right things, although those end up being essential. Being a follower of Jesus, as we talked about last week, is about a connection to Jesus himself. That is the single thing that ties us all together as Christians.

Think about the fishing net. It's hundreds or thousands of individual lines tied together all over the place. Those small strands come together to make up one big net. To expand the net, a new strand is tied into the net so that it becomes connected the whole. You still see the one strand, but it's strength is really in the fact that it's tied together with the rest of the net.

And of course the thing that binds all of the lines them all together are the knots-- their connection to Jesus. I know I'm taking this analogy pretty far, but it seems to me as if Jesus is calling these fishermen, saying, "You can stop mending your nets, because I'm making a net out of you. And you all are going to help me bring in a big catch."

The net itself is both a means and an end. By calling disciples to himself, Jesus is able to teach them his message so that they can go and gather more disciples. The community that Jesus creates is a community that brings others in. It's a community that makes disciples. I should say that when I say that phrase, "make disciples," I don't just mean converting people. I mean helping them follow Jesus and do the things that Jesus did.

Methodism has always been about this view of discipleship. I've said this before, but important things bear repeating. The Methodist movement wasn't just some people deciding to make a new church. It emerged organically out of the church of England as disciples connected to other with disciples. Through their shared connection to Jesus these people wanted to grow spiritually and be accountable to one another for their growth. They not only helped one another find ways to live out their Christian faith, but they checked in on one another to help ensure that they were each doing the things that Christians should do.

They met together weekly to check in about how they were living out the Christian life. In order to continue being a methodist, each member was asked weekly about how they were doing in three areas: first, were they doing no harm and avoiding doing evil. Second, were they doing good both to the bodies and the souls of others? In other words, were they taking care of people's physical needs and their spiritual needs. And third, were they being disciplined about encountering the grace of God, whenever they could-- through attending

worship, hearing or reading God's word, receiving Holy Communion, praying privately and with their families, studying scripture, and fasting.

You look at this, and from the outside you say, "wow, who signs up for that?" The reality is that you sign up for it because you recognize that these people, whose lives are wholly poured out in love, have something that you don't have. You sign up because it's absolutely undeniable that Jesus means the world to them, and that it can't be anyone other than God who has knit together the hearts of so many in love.

John Wesley said "Solitary religion is not to be found [in the Gospel of Christ]." He says, "'Holy solitaries' is a phrase no more consistent with the Gospel than 'holy adulterers.' The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness. Faith working by love is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection."

I think what he means is this: Jesus doesn't call people into the kingdom of God as someone promising pie in the sky when you die. Jesus calls disciples here and now to live out transformed lives in community with one another and for the sake of the world.

The face of Methodism has changed so much since those early days. I for one know I would have been kicked out of the Methodist societies many times. Maybe that would have been good for me, I don't know. But I continue to be intrigued by the way that Jesus calls disciples-- not only to follow him, but to walk with one another. Jesus is the master networker.

I witnessed the benefit of this this past Thursday night when we gathered together to study prayer. Although I did some teaching, it wasn't just about me dispensing information. It was about us hearing from each other the difficulties we have in prayer. It was learning from

each other strategies for overcoming difficulties. It was discipling one another as Jesus has disciplined us in prayer. And I can't speak for those who came, but I feel like I benefited immensely from what each person who came brought. It wasn't what the early Methodists did, or even the fullness of what I hope we might do together one day. But it was such an encouraging pointer toward the truth that we're in this together-- to build one another up.

We need each other to help us stay connected to Jesus. We need each other to make sure we're going about doing the work. We need each other to make sure we're not stuck in destructive behaviors.

But this is the good news of the gospel. This network of Christians-- the net that Jesus has put together to make disciples-- no one person deserves to be there. It's only because Jesus invites us. It's not about your status in the world. It's not about the money in your bank account. It's not about how good you are at your job. It's simply about hearing and answering the call of Jesus.

So he's my final wordplay for thought. As you think about your network, what's your network worth? What's your Christian *net* worth? What's your Christian *net worth*? Do you see yourself as a lone wolf, keeping yourself to your own private spirituality? Or are you recognizing that you are bound together by Christ with other Christians, and it's together that we grow?

Or perhaps you realize that you're not really part of the Christian net yet. That's ok. It might surprise you to know that while the early Methodists were clear about upholding certain practices for their members, all that was needed to enter the community was a desire-- a desire to experience the power of God in your life-- to be made into someone acceptable to God.

Christ is calling, saying, “Come, follow me.” Leave behind your net work and join this network that I am making. It’s not what you know, it’s who you know. And if you know me, Jesus says, I’ll lead you to the holy of holies-- the presence of God.