

Epiphany 2 Year A
John 1:29-42
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John's story of the call of the first disciples offers another example of the theological motives that inspired the evangelists, a motive we simply can't notice if we believe they are writing history. In Matthew, Mark and Luke John is already in prison before Jesus begins to recruit disciples, and when Jesus does he gathers his first ones while walking the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Today we see that John is very much a free man, and not only that, Andrew is among his disciples. It is John who tells Andrew to follow Jesus, whereupon Andrew goes and recruits his own brother, Simon Peter. A totally different story.

I don't believe John was "right" and the other three "wrong," or the other way around. John the Evangelist wanted to make clear that even though John the Baptist had baptized Jesus, Jesus was still greater than John; Jesus was the "Coming one," Jesus was the messiah, not John, a point he makes several times in the first chapter. This concern might puzzle us today, for no one now believes John the Baptist was the messiah. However, for the first couple of generations of Christians this was clearly an issue. All four gospels take pains to subordinate John to Jesus, something they manifestly would not have done had there not been some thought that John, and not Jesus, was the promised messiah. This was John the Evangelist's way to do it.

He chose a particularly effective method, one I like far better than the awkward speech Matthew gives to John the Baptist just before he baptizes Jesus. In Matthew's story John the Baptist seems to be humiliated by the very thought he would be called upon to baptize Jesus, and he attempts to get out of it. Here something else more significant is going on. Here Andrew responds to the call of his master to move from that which is good to that which is best. Instructed by John the Baptist, Andrew leaves one sort of discipleship to take on another; that is worth pondering, because it happens a lot.

My daughter Rachel spent a certain amount of her life planning to become a physical therapist. It is a good profession, one that has brought a lot of relief and even new life to many, many people. She even took the chemistry she needed to qualify for the program. Gradually she began to realize that physical therapy was not her true call; something else beckoned her. She got her Spanish degree, went to graduate school in education and became a Spanish teacher and ESL instructor. I am not generalizing here about the relative merits of the two career paths, but for Rachel teaching was the higher calling, she moved from that which was good to that which was best. My guess is that nearly everyone here, perhaps indeed everyone here, can point to a moment in life when you did something of that same sort, and moved from something good to something that was best.

This illustration points at, but does not truly capture, the fullness of what is going on. Andrew did move from that which is good to that which is best, but

there is more to it than just that. In making that move he was more profoundly moving away from that which was contingent to that which was ultimate.

It is an awkward phrase, for which I apologize, but I am trying to suggest something. The good thing that most of us give ourselves to is almost always something we can see, interact with directly, and often even control a little bit. Whether it is family, job, country, or cause, devotion to these sorts of things, though good, is devotion to something contingent, something that came into being at some point and will pass out of being eventually, even if it takes centuries. At their very best these good things point to God, but they are not God. Even our religion is not itself God, something that times it is hard to remember. Our devotion to these things, therefore can actually narrow our view, constrict our sense of what God is and how God works. When we devote ourselves purely to God, we devote ourselves to that which is ultimate, and therefore is not to be controlled, fully understood, and cannot be touched or interacted with directly. To give yourself to God is therefore to give yourself to trust completely something that is not tangible, and not truly knowable. It really is living by faith.

That is something much more difficult for people to do. For often that requires immense sacrifice; it involves abandoning that which creates comfort, a sense of security or prestige, or power. Those who move from the contingent to the ultimate often find that they are misunderstood, and even at times rejected. It is Martin Luther King weekend, so I will reflect on him for a moment. King

was as deeply devoted to the cause of justice for all Americans as anyone in this nation's history. But his advocacy was not rooted in the contingent, in the limited. In his case, he was not campaigning just for black people, he was campaigning for all of humanity as we stand together before God. Because his first devotion was to God and God alone, he rejected violence altogether, for violence against white people is just as much violence against a child of God as violence against black people would be.

King understood this, and was therefore misunderstood not only by the defenders of Jim Crow, whose racism - like that of my grandparents - was sometimes unconscious, as well as those whose racism was fully conscious and well defined, but also by people such as Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, even SNCC. These groups generally believed that the goal was rectifying the injustices of three hundred years no matter what it took. Although they advocated various remedies, their devotion was to the cause of black people, not to God. Indeed, only when Malcolm X went to Mecca and discovered the unity of all humanity visibly expressed did he begin to understand that the tactics of King represented a higher devotion than his, for it was a devotion to God and God's kingdom, not to a particular group within God's kingdom.

Now I suspect that even King's devotion was in some way contingent, but he gives us a glimpse of someone who, like Andrew, moved from devotion to something contingent to devotion to God, to the Ultimate. For as just as King gave up his devotion to a good and safe career as a pastor and preacher for

devotion to God that brought him into the very dangerous world basic of human rights, a devotion that cost him his life before he turned forty, so too did Andrew give up his devotion to family and friends, and a relatively safe life as a fisherman, in order to follow Jesus. And that movement from a devotion to a contingent life to a devotion to that which is Ultimate, cost him everything, including his life.

The question then arises as to why anyone would abandon the world of the contingent for the sake of the higher calling of the Ultimate. I don't know the answer to that because I have never answer that higher call; my devotion has always been to the contingent, to family, to friends, to the Church, but never quite to the God at whom, and to whom all these things and more point when they are doing their very best. And in this I am like nearly every person who has ever lived. Those who, like Andrew, have gone not just from the good to the better, but from the contingent to the Ultimate, are very few, and inevitably say that it is worth the price, no matter what that price is.

It is worth the price because those few who enter into true union with God realize finally, and for the first time, that they are in true unity with all people and all creation, including themselves. The alienation that people feel from themselves and others disappears. There is nothing contingent, nothing created, that can give us such a deep sense of our true selves in relation to everything else. True union with God is thus not a mystical escape from the world, it is the deepest sort of plunging into the world, and as well it is seeing the world as it

truly is in its totality, as the reflection of God and God's love. This is what I have been told.

Thus I have to wonder if the real question is why don't we do this? I suppose the answer is not that we are too scared or lazy, it is that we lack the spiritual imagination to believe truly and deeply in the kingdom of God, and so in the name of God we live in kingdoms of our own making. That is what do. I just can't imagine the kingdom Andrew saw, and haven't the trust to abandon the contingent for the sake of the ultimate. But I know the Ultimate is real, constantly calling me on, bidding me draw near. And I also believe that some time, in this life or the next, that Ultimate will finally get us all, as it got Andrew, and we will see what he saw, and live as he lived and become what he now is.