

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas J. Brown, on Sunday, 23 January 2011, the Third Sunday after the Epiphany in lectionary year A.

A couple of Thursdays ago, in the Basic Bible class, I was trumping up Eugene Peterson's work *The Message*, his own re-telling of the New Testament; I'm a big fan of Peterson. In a different book by Eugene Peterson he says, "there are no experts in the company of Jesus. We're all beginners." Then he says, "I can't imagine how the term 'laity' and the assumptions drawn from it came to be. After all, didn't Jesus call only lay persons to follow him? Not a priest or a professor among the twelve men and numerous women followers." [in *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways Jesus is the Way.*]

The story of Christian faith begins when a young man one day leaves his home, sets out on an adventure, and takes, to borrow from Robert Frost, "the road less traveled." We could miss it...that's how inconspicuous it is. Matthew records it like this: "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea."

It begins when something stirs in a young carpenter's heart, and he leaves his younger brothers and sisters, and lives into God's call on his life. And it continues as the same thing immediately happens again in the lives of others. Walking along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sees two brothers, Peter and Andrew. "Follow me," he says, and they "left their nets and followed him." And then two more, James and John, in the boat with their father: "Follow me," and immediately they followed.

For most of us life's choices are usually a little more complicated and ambiguous than "Follow me' and they left their nets and followed." But at some point we had to decide to get up from what we were doing and move.

How do you describe faith? Is it a list of ideas to believe? If we considered something more post-enlightenment than the stuff we grew up with, then we might think about faith as a kind of openness to truth, whatever truth turns out to be.

If faith is adherence to a set of beliefs, we can draw lines between those who are in and those who aren't, those who believe and those who don't. And, we can tell ourselves we don't belong in church because we can't affirm all the beliefs. And we can enjoy, in some sick sense I think, arguing about whose list of beliefs is the real and authentic one. There's grace in remembering that it all begins not with a list of beliefs to adhere to, not with a creed, but with a voice saying, "Follow me."

God calls us in the context of our lives, not necessarily when we're being religious, saying our prayers, or singing hymns, but while we're at our nets, working, living, loving, parenting, making decisions about who to vote for, how to spend our resources. The call comes to us about all those matters about which we are most passionate: our deepest and dearest loves, our strongest concerns and commitments, our most precious hopes and dreams.

Christ calls us to follow in the events and relationships and challenges of our daily lives. There's no forcing the issue. In God's good grace, we are free to ignore the call; that's part of what I heard Roger say in his sermon last week. We're free to spend our lives avoiding the call.

Victor Hugo's great novel *Les Misérables*, and the Broadway musical which followed, is, in part, the story of a spiritual journey. Jean Valjean is an ex-convict, having served a sentence of nineteen years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread. As the novel opens, he is out of prison finally but is lost and hungry and cold. He is given shelter and food by a kind and generous bishop. During the night he awakens, steals the bishop's silver, and runs away. He is captured by the police, brought back to the bishop's residence in

shame to return the stolen pieces of silver. But before anyone can say a word, the bishop greets Jean Valjean: “There you are. I’m glad to see you. But I gave you the candlesticks also. . . . Why did you not take them along with the plates?”

He wasn’t searching for anything but food, a place to sleep, and he was tracked down and found by a kindly grace that literally transformed his life.

God comes to each of us in the voice of Christ. We respond in all sorts of ways. Some respond by leaving home and studying. Others stay home and continue doing what they’re doing, going to work, taking care of business, diapering the babies, cooking the meals, arguing the case, teaching the class, closing the deal.

But all of us are called to a new new life shaped by kingdom values--justice, hope, and charity.

John Newton got it right, the eighteenth-century British sea captain plying the slave trade. Newton inspired the giant Anglican Evangelical William Wilberforce and together with thousands of others they worked to abolish slavery in Great Britain. Newton also wrote Amazing Grace, one of the most beloved hymns:

I once was lost, but now am found,  
was blind, but now I see.

Once lost—now found. That’s the way it is with God and with us: Jesus and Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Jesus Christ and you and me. You don’t have to have it all worked out intellectually, don’t have to have pat answers to all of life’s big and troublesome questions.

As Jesus walked by the sea, he saw two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, casting a net into the sea. “Follow me,” he said, “and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him.