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Matthew 4:12-23
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Every time I read Matthew's account Jesus calling the disciples, I am struck by the same thing. I am struck by the courage of the disciples to leave their nets and follow Jesus. After all Jesus was not inviting them out for coffee or pizza, Jesus was calling them to a whole new life.

Simon and Andrew, James and John were fishermen. This was not just a sport for them, it was not just a job; it was their whole way of life, their identity. As young boys they grew up at their fathers' side, learning the family trade, looking forward to the day when their father would allow them to take the boats out by themselves. I cannot imagine that these men had ever considered any other way of life. And yet, as they sat in their boats, Jesus came to them and said, "Follow me," and they did. They left their nets and everything they knew to follow this man they knew nothing about.

I don't know about you, but I'm not sure I could do that. The thing that strikes me the most is what they left behind. Those nets represented so much to those men. The nets were their identity, their family, their livelihood, their comfortable familiarities, and their security; and yet at the call of Jesus, they left their nets, and all they represented behind.

Working with seminary students, too often I see all the things we are not willing to let go of, indeed the things to which we cling that often hold us back as we seek to follow Jesus. For some it is the security of a stable job, either theirs or their spouses'. For others, it is the comfort of home, and being surrounded by friends and family, while still others cling to their home congregations and the familiar expression of faith and worship.

Of course, it is easier to see what others cling to, it's the old log in the eye thing, so I ask you to consider this question, what is it that you cling to? What holds you back from fully following Jesus? When I am honest with myself, I guess I'd have to say that fear is what holds me back the most. I remember when I decided to go to seminary. That part, believe it or not, wasn't so frightening, it was when I actually stepped into campus life and began to grasp the reality of what this call would mean, not only in my life, but also in my faith. Another time in particular that I remember fear getting in the way was when Brian and I made the decision to begin moving toward becoming a tithing household. I was panic struck. We had two small children, two cars, a house with a mortgage... I had no idea how we would make it.

While most of the time it takes me a while to recognize my fear, and I am certain that there are many times when I never acknowledge it, but when I do, it is clear to me that I have two choices, I can choose faith or fear.

If the disciples had fear, it was not visible that day on the beach. Now, later in Matthew's gospel, their fear reads like a great big neon sign, but not that day on the beach. I can't help but wonder what it was about Jesus, in that first encounter, that was so was

certain that it wasn't the disciples' extraordinary faith. Throughout the gospel, it is clear that they are as human as you and I. I have to think that it was not the disciples, but Jesus that was different. Was it his walk, his presence, the authority in his voice? While Matthew does not use the same poetic language as John, I cannot help but think that on the beach that day, the disciples must have some how known that they had encountered the Word made flesh, Emmanuel, God with them, there on that beach.

What an awesome gift, to encounter the living Lord, standing in your midst, no wonder it was so easy for them to let go of their nets and all that they mean to them and cling only to Jesus. Wouldn't it be nice to have that same kind of encounter? Or have we? It was just last month that we celebrated the Word made flesh, not just for a season, but for all times, right? And if you ask any of our youth, they will tell you that God lives at Mo Ranch, they have seen and felt and heard God there. And some people say they have seen God down at the Stew Pot, there among the clients they serve. I've heard some of you say that you have seen God sitting on the chancel steps with our children. I have even heard that God has been sighted in a few of our Bible studies and around some of our dinner tables, perhaps even here, at the Lord's Table as we share the bread and the cup together.

Over and over and over again, Jesus say, do not fear, for I am with you, always, to the end of the age. Several years ago, we had a girl here in our youth program that lived with a very real fear. This girl was given a silver bracelet from a member of this congregation, and the bracelet was inscribed with Jesus' final words to his disciples in Matthew's gospel, "Lo, I am with you always." The girl always had that bracelet on, and when I would ask her to do something that was difficult, whether it was to be vulnerable and share her faith, or to be courageous and climb to the top of the Mo Pole, she would always look at me with her big doe eyes and I would think, "Oh no, I've pushed her too far." But then I would see her right hand reach out and touch the bracelet on her left, and almost unperceivably she would nod, eyes still wide open, as she stepped out in faith. May that child lead us all.

Do not fear, for I am with you always, to end of time.