

Making decisions

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, January 23, 2011: The Third Sunday after the Epiphany.
Based on Matthew 4:12-23.*

You should share your email address with us. I say this because I sent an announcement to the universe of people who've given us their current email address on Friday. But I'm aware already this morning that people have come here without the news that was in that announcement. So, if you don't get Crossroads, the Electronic Crossroads with Buddy Stallings' message late Tuesday or early Wednesday, and if you don't get my e-letter every Friday, that means that we don't have a current email address. I hope that you will stop at the desk in the Narthex—St. Bart's Central—and give that email address.

Here's the news. I announced on Friday that I intend to retire one year from now. And, linked to that message was a letter from me to you, and a letter from your Wardens about the process. Announcing this a year in advance of my 65th birthday is, I believe, a key to the right kind of transition for St. Bart's at this moment in history. After due consideration, our bishop agreed. So at the end of this next year I will leave and the Vestry will appoint Buddy Stallings as your priest-in-charge with the authority of rector. Between the first and second year of his leadership, the Bishop will review things with the Vestry. If everything is cool, then Buddy Stallings will be elected as Rector.

Now you see that an email would have gotten you all that news and spare my having to tell you now. So, I'll mention it one more time: do stop and give your email at the desk.



The story is told that Socrates met Xenophon in a narrow passageway in Athens and that he stretched out his staff to bar the way. He asked Xenophon where he could purchase various kinds of food. When he received a reply, he put another question to Xenophon: "Where do people go to become good and honorable?" Xenophon was puzzled by the question, to which Socrates responded, "Then follow me, and learn." From that time on he was a disciple of Socrates.

You can read that little gem of knowledge in in the third century B.C.E. book, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, by Diogenes Laertius. As Diogenes tells it, it's the ideal encounter between teacher and disciple. And it's a little sobering to think, after 2500 years and all our supposed progress, that Socrates could stop just about any one of us with his staff, smile ruefully, shake his head slightly and still have to say: "You seem to know how to shop but not how to find out what's important in life."

The Gospel of Matthew also has an idealized story of a teacher making disciples, the story read as our Gospel lesson. Jesus takes Peter and Andrew as his disciples. I'd like you to take a look at a couple of things in this story, one that has meant a lot to me, especially this week.

First, the way it's told, Jesus does not coerce; he invites. And when he does, he says something—"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."—that turns out to be one of those lines that makes students of the bible sit up straight.

As I think you've known and heard often from this pulpit, I believe the gospels are literature that comes to us inspired but filtered through personal experience and through the artistry of the writers. Not every word they ascribe to Jesus was actually said by Jesus, or at least in the way reported by the writers.

But 'fish for people' is one of those lines that can't be found in any other ancient literature—not in the Hebrew Scriptures, not in the considerable writings of the sages and teachers of other religions, not in anything that archaeologists have found. That meets the test of singularity, and it joins a tight body of other singular language and ideas that form the authentic core of Jesus' life-changing teaching.

The metaphor about fishing for people, or using a hook to catch them, does occasionally occur; but it's always in a hostile sense of capturing or killing human beings, or in the context of destruction or judgment.

But you find none of that in the approach of Jesus. With him you get pure invitation; and pure invitation is the foundation, the entire spirit, of the radical welcome that at our best is what we do here every day in the name of Jesus.

Invitation is work. We aren't Jesus, so it takes a village, a church, to invite and welcome people into the depth, the healing and the newness of life in Christ.

It also takes steadiness, patience, planning, and creativity for us mere mortals to sustain a credible welcome. It also takes realism, and a humble self-awareness, to try to imitate the itinerant rabbi of Galilee in putting out an unconditional welcome when experience tells you that a fairly high percentage of people will be suspicious of it, and a lot of them will reject it—and you.

But that's the work that hooked me into this profession. It's the work I've done every week, essentially every day, for 38 years . . . but who's counting?

And it's why I've decided to ask you to work with me on a long goodbye, a year to finish up some pretty important stuff and to structure the handoff in such a way that the beating heart of this great place will not miss a beat.

The second thing that seems so striking in this story of Jesus inviting Peter and Andrew is that they made their decision to follow him *immediately*. It says in no uncertain terms, *immediately*.

I've come to realize, especially in this last period of discernment and decision making that it is sometimes the fast, compact and very intense decisions are the ones that turn out to be the hinges of our lives.

Yet no good decision is really ever made on the spot or in isolation from who we are and what our cumulative experience has been.

Any good decision involves self-appraisal.

Any good decision means trying to read the signs of the times.

Any good decision will always take into account its effect on others.

The ancient Greeks gave to the early Christians two ways to think about time from the Greek language and philosophy: *chronos*—or chronological time, just the time as the clock clicks away, just the time we count. And *kairos*—which is a kind of intervention in time, crossing the chronological time, invading it with a special sense of purpose. Every life has the occasional *kairos* moment.

The early Christians came to think that the earthly life of Jesus crossed ordinary time, marked it, and changed it forever.

In the end real decisions—decisions that *change* things—rely on our being honest about ourselves, our abilities, and our opportunities—and all in the context of our beliefs and our values.

No decision is perfect, but like life in its very essence, a decision has to do with trust. The leap of faith is not a blind leap. It's not reckless. But it does rest on something that can't be tested at the moment, only built up from all those prior moments, all those relationships, all that trust—not total security, and not perfection. Trust is the key to doing the thing that was right, life-giving and true.

The life-changing encounters and decisions of those first disciples seemed lightning-fast, and there are no wasted words rehashing those decisions. No anxious list of what ifs. No record of what their families thought and what happened to their business associates.

But there are books written afterwards, and lives given to the adventure that followed.

So, my friends, decision made. Next chapter begins. Work to be done. Let's keep fishing. *Amen.*

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and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads
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