

FOLLOWING ON AN IMPULSE

WOW! Didn't you just LOVE watching the INAUGURATION this week? How impressive was THAT? And how WONDERFUL it IS to see all the EXCITEMENT in America these days, and ALL the HOPE we're witnessing for the future. I find it EXTREMELY contagious! I've been a part of a couple of CHURCHES like that, where people have REALLY gotten EXCITED and HOPEFUL about their CHURCH and their FAITH! And it's AMAZING how CONTAGIOUS it IS, and how FAST a church can begin to GROW when that happens! But, I guess that I was MOST impressed this week at seeing how MANY people went to Washington on an IMPULSE! My friends, Daehler Hayes and Joy Utter, are TWO of them. Daehler is the retired Conference Minister from Rhode Island, and years ago, his wife, Joy, was my Co-pastor in Seekonk. And the TWO of them took off on an IMPULSE the night before the Inauguration, and took the TRAIN to Washington. When I HEARD that, I thought: *Knowing Daehler, I wouldn't be surprised to see him sitting on the PODIUM.* I remember a time when he told his entire family to meet him for his BIRTHDAY at *The Kentucky Derby*. What they DIDN'T realize was that he didn't have TICKETS, so 14 people showed up. And even though it was long since SOLD out, good old Daehler got EVERY one of them a SEAT for the race. Anyway, WASN'T it incredible how MANY people just WENT there on an IMPULSE because they were just SO excited? Well, the more I HEARD about these people, the MORE I was reminded of our Scripture Lesson for TODAY, the story of JESUS calling the FISHERMEN.

Years ago, I saw a MOVIE by the Italian film director, PASOLINI. And the movie was entitled, *The GOSPEL of Saint MATTHEW*. And it MOVED me as no other FILM account of the LIFE of Jesus ever HAS. Whereas MOST biblical films are of the Charlton Heston and Cecil B. DeMille variety, with everything in PASTELS, a blond-haired Jesus, and GIGANTIC sets, PASOLINI chose to use BLACK and WHITE instead of color, and ordinary, PEASANT people rather than big-name actors. And he TOLD the story EXACTLY as it is WRITTEN.

Well, the most moving SCENE in that movie is when JESUS calls His DISCIPLES. He's walking down a dusty, Galilean road when He SEES some FISHERMEN toiling over their nets. So, He calls OUT to them: *FOLLOW ME!* And THEN, there is a LONG moment of SILENCE, as they stare DUMBLY at Jesus, as if ASKING themselves: *WHAT did He say?* And FINALLY, first ONE, and then another, DROP what they're doing and FOLLOW Jesus, who, by NOW, is WAY down the road. You see: He wasn't WAITING for them! He just KEPT on WALKING! And I remember wondering at the time: *COULD it have actually HAPPENED this way, with just a WORD from a man they hardly KNEW, someone they'd BARELY gotten a GLIMPSE of? COULD they have actually left EVERYTHING behind and followed JESUS on the basis of that SIMPLE invitation? COULD it have BEEN that way?*

Well, at ABOUT the SAME time as I saw that MOVIE, I kept hearing one of my MENTORS, Bruce Bunker, the Senior Minister in Wallingford, CT, saying to our Confirmation Class: *You know, SOMEDAY you MIGHT just wake up LOVING! SOMEDAY, you MIGHT just wake up feeling COMPELLED to DO or SAY something, or to WORK for something BIGGER than your OWN little life. SOMEDAY, you MIGHT just feel COMPELLED to take a STAND on some ISSUE, or to DO something that seems CRAZY by the standards of THIS world. And WHEN you wake up with that FEELING, or that IMPULSE, it MIGHT just be GOD calling you!*

*And if it IS God calling you, then you will NOT be able to say 'NO,' at least NOT for very LONG! So, you MIGHT as well just go ahead and FOLLOW that IMPULSE -- FOLLOW that divine CALL. And he would go ON to use the example of the DISCIPLES being CALLED by Jesus, and how THEY let go of EVERYTHING they KNEW in order to FOLLOW Him.*

Well for ME, at that time, THIS was a NEW way of understanding this story. I had always understood it to be an EXAMPLE of what biblical scholars call **TELESCOPING**. THAT'S when a gospel writer takes events that PROBABLY occurred over the course of DAYS, or even WEEKS, and RECORDS them in such a way that they APPEAR to happen in just a few MOMENTS. And the gospels are FULL of **TELESCOPING**. So, I just ASSUMED that THIS was just another CASE of it. After all, WHO is to say that JESUS didn't spend HOURS arguing with these fishermen, trying to CONVINCING them to FOLLOW Him? And, WHO is to say that THEY didn't DEBATE it amongst themselves for a VERY long time? AND, WHO is say that they didn't make the decision to JOIN the JESUS movement very SLOWLY and DELIBERATELY?

And BECAUSE Mark only takes **5 verses** to tell how **4 fishermen** heard a **10-WORD INVITATION** and dropped EVERYTHING to follow Jesus, I'VE always just FILLED in the blanks MYSELF. I'VE imagined, for example, that Simon and Andrew were sibling RIVALRY, and that HEARING Jesus SPEAK somehow HEALED their animosity. And I've IMAGINED that JAMES had been SEARCHING for something ALL his life -- searching for MEANING and purpose -- and that he was SICK of just fishing and mending nets, FISHING and mending nets; and that HEARING Jesus PREACH that day suddenly made him feel NEW and ALIVE, maybe even born AGAIN. Yes, I'VE always just filled in the BLANKS that Mark left OUT. However, when I saw that MOVIE and heard my MENTOR saying: *one day you MIGHT just wake up LOVING, and feeling COMPELLED in some way, I WONDERED: Could it BE that it actually HAPPENED the way Mark SAYS it did? And WHAT if it DID? WHAT if their following Jesus was, in fact, an act of IMPULSE -- WITHOUT considering ALL the facts and alternatives and consequences? WHAT if they DID just get up and FOLLOW Jesus? WHAT does that say to US?*

You know, MAYBE Mark is telling us that THIS is the BEST way to FOLLOW Jesus. After ALL: if we stop and THINK about it for very long, and REASON it all out, we might NEVER do what it is we're feeling CALLED to do! How many TIMES have I had a feeling that I should DO something, or SAY something, but ended up THINKING about it for too long, or just NEVER got around to DOING it? And how many TIMES have I REGRETTED having that happen? At OTHER times, of course, we KNOW that WHAT we are feeling CALLED to do or say might NOT be POPULAR, and it MIGHT even get us into TROUBLE. NOTICE how Mark NOTES the fact that John the BAPTIST has just been ARRESTED. And WE know that John's HEAD ends up on a DISH! Well, IF that happens to the FORERUNNER of Jesus, WHAT will happen to JESUS? AND, what will happen to those who FOLLOW Jesus? As Daniel Berrigan once said: *IF you want to follow Jesus, you had BETTER look GOOD on WOOD!* So, WHAT reasonable and intelligent person would EVER follow Jesus EXCEPT on an IMPULSE? I guess that's why, USUALLY when someone TELLS me they've decided to DO something for GOD, or that they feel CALLED to follow Christ in a certain direction, they usually BEGIN by saying: *I know that you're going to think I'm CRAZY, but....* and then, they go on to TELL me what it is they feel CALLED to DO.

For example, I once had a Deacon SURPRISE me by announcing that he had decided to give UP his Sunday afternoons with his FAMILY in order to GO to a nearby NURSING home and offer the residents a service of WORSHIP and communion EVERY Sunday. He said: *I KNOW this sounds CRAZY, but I feel a NEED to offer these people something on a REGULAR basis.* So, EVERY Sunday, even though it OFTEN caused an UPSET in his OWN home, HE was at that NURSING home LEADING worship and VISITING patients. He would EVEN take communion UPSTAIRS to residents who couldn't come DOWNSTAIRS for the service. Well, a number of years later, when this Deacon DIED very suddenly, 3 significant THINGS happened. FIRST, the nursing home residents told the administration that THEY wanted their OWN Memorial Service for this man BECAUSE, they said: *He was OUR pastor, after all.* SECOND, the Deacons in that church began working together to CONTINUE leading those Sunday afternoon SERVICES each week. And NOW, many years LATER, it CONTINUES; and it's a BEAUTIFUL ministry. And finally, his wife and family found great HEALING by buying FURNISHINGS for the little CHAPEL in the nursing home IN this man's MEMORY. Friends, this Deacon STARTED that service on an IMPULSE! And he HAD to, because IF he'd THOUGHT about it, and what it would COST him and his family, he wouldn't have DONE it.

OR, take CAROL. Carol was the Director of *HOUSE of BREAD*, a soup kitchen and shelter in Hartford. And Carol's STORY is that she was an EXECUTIVE in one of the largest insurance companies in Hartford. However, occasionally she VOLUNTEERED at *House of Bread*, and when the DIRECTOR'S position came OPEN, someone mentioned to her that SHE might make a terrific DIRECTOR. And CAROL had a sense that, through this person, God was CALLING her to a NEW vocation. So, ON an IMPULSE, she asked for a leave of absence from her job at the insurance company and became the ACTING Director of *House of Bread*. Well, she NEVER went BACK to the insurance company! HOWEVER, she says that, IF she had THOUGHT about it for long, she NEVER would have done it. She would have found reasons to KEEP her high salary JOB.

And in my OWN career, my BEST decisions have been when I've followed on an IMPULSE. I didn't WANT to go to Seekonk. I'd ONLY applied there in CASE I didn't get one of the OTHER positions I wanted. Well, who KNEW that I would get to CHOOSE from FOUR churches? And Seekonk was my FOURTH choice -- UNTIL I felt what I describe as a NUDGING, until I felt what I think was a distinct CALL from God to GO to that CHURCH. And I had a SIMILAR experience when I went to Southington. Well, God certainly blessed BOTH of those ministries. And it's because WHEN we follow on an IMPULSE, God BLESSES, GUIDES, and EMPOWERS us to DO the work God CALLS us to DO.

Now, I'M not saying that we should NEVER think THROUGH what it is we're feeling CALLED to do or say. Of COURSE we need to DO that, because OFTEN what we're hearing is SELF-TALK rather than GOD-TALK. So, we NEED to work at discerning WHO is speaking to us -- WHO is calling us? Is it GOD or is it OURSELVES? No, what I'M saying is that TOO often we think TOO much when we feel a NUDGING or an IMPULSE, so that we end up MISSING opportunities for discipleship, MISSING opportunities to do GOD'S work! And therefore, WE need to learn to QUICKLY discern what is SELF-TALK and what is GOD-TALK. WE need to learn to QUICKLY discern what is GOD'S voice in our lives, and then to TRUST that divine voice, whether it comes to us through other PEOPLE or in our DREAMS; whether it comes to us via our FEELINGS and intuitions or as we read SCRIPTURE. And ONCE we learn to QUICKLY discern and TRUST the voice of GOD in our lives, THEN, like those

FISHERMEN, we must take the NEXT step! We need to DARE to LEAVE our nets and FOLLOW -- ON an IMPULSE! We need to DARE to leave EVERYTHING that has CLAIMS on us, and that KEEPS us from doing the most IMPORTANT work of ALL, which is the work that GOD calls us to DO!

You know, friends: THIS is something that I struggle with CONTINUALLY. And I share it with you so that YOU might struggle with it as WELL, because believe me: it is a HUGE part of being a DISCIPLE of Jesus Christ. WHENEVER we hear that call, *FOLLOW me*: do we just keep on FISHING, even if we're thinking about it, **OR**, do we RISE up and FOLLOW to wherever it is He LEADS us. It's not easy to HEAR God's call, as we talked about LAST week. It's ALSO not easy to discern GOD'S voice amidst all the OTHER voices, as we ALSO talked about LAST week. AND, it's CERTAINLY not easy to FOLLOW on an IMPULSE as those FISHERMEN did. BUT, it's EXTREMELY important that we LEARN to DO it. So, THINK about it, my friends, think about it a LOT -- and PRAY about it -- because it's a BIG part of being a DISCIPLE. Amen.

(Thanks to my colleague, William Willimon, for some of the insights in this sermon).