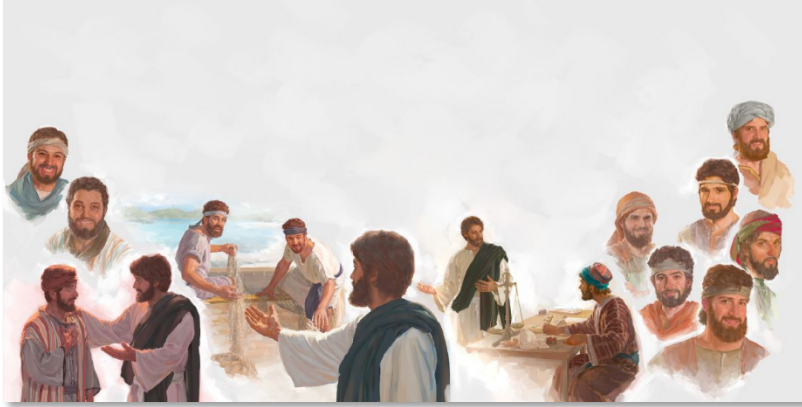


## Homily for Sunday, June 18, 2023



Sometimes when I read gospel stories, especially stories that are so familiar, my mind automatically jumps ahead and says, “I know where this story is going.” Jumping to the conclusion is not a good way of entering into any scripture story. The revelation that the story is trying to enlighten our minds with is not the same thing as walking the path of the revelation. Anybody can say, “Jesus is Lord.” I believe that’s true, but it won’t get me very far. It’s the revelation but not the path to the revelation. Anybody can say, “Jesus died and was raised to new life.” That is a true revelation, but it’s not the path to the revelation. The calling of the 12 Apostles is true, but it won’t change me in any positive and lasting way until I can get into their story and realize it’s also my story. When you read scripture, try to always picture yourself in the scene. What do you see, hear, and feel as the story unfolds? Do a little guided imagery, and I promise you the Word of God will become more and more a living Word speaking to you here and now.

The calling of the 12 Apostles can come across as so nonchalant, so blasé, so casual and laid back that it loses its power. Once it loses its power, once I whittle it down to a story about them way back then, it no longer has the power to speak to me here and now.

If you are able to view the series “The Chosen,” do it. It’s so well done, especially the portrayal of the Apostles. While watching it, you will find deep parts of yourself connecting with the Apostles in a very credible way. And isn’t that what the Scriptures are supposed to do---help us make connections? The calling of the Apostles is not just their story; it’s yours, mine, and the story of everyone who has ever been baptized.

The process of a first-century rabbi in Palestine choosing his disciples was a big deal. It happened in stages and was not to be taken lightly. In Biblical times, Jewish children from age six onward would begin learning about Moses and the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Jews believe these first five books were the most important of all Hebrew Scriptures and fundamental to what it meant to be a good Jew. From age six to ten, the brightest Jewish children would have the Torah memorized. If you weren’t so bright, your time in school was limited and you spent most of your time learning the family trade of your father.

From age 10 to 15, the cream of the crop continued their education and were expected to commit not only the first five books of the Bible to memory but the entire Hebrew Scriptures. Again, the majority of children would be weeded out and end up working in the family business.

A select few students, who were considered the very best and brightest, went on to apprentice under a rabbi. You had to apply and beg a rabbi to accept you as a disciple in training. If the rabbi thought the student had what it was going to take, he would say, “Follow me.” The student would then leave family,

home, loved ones, and belongings and physically follow the rabbi wherever he went. You would be covered in everything the rabbi stepped in, and others would bless you with the words, “May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi.” It reminds me of Pope Francis’ words. After being pope for only two weeks, Francis said to priests and bishops gathered at the Chrism Mass, “This is what I am asking of you—be shepherds with the smell of sheep.” He was telling them that if they didn’t smell like sheep, it’s probably because they weren’t daring themselves to go where Jesus himself first went.

Getting back to today’s story—if you were fishing with your father and not associated with a rabbi, you were definitely not at the top of your class. The fact that you were working in the family business meant you missed the mark in school. Yet, Jesus chooses them. This is far from what the other rabbis had been doing when they only selected the best! There is no doubt that the very clear message Jesus sent to them, and to us, is that his way is for everybody—not just for the best of the best, but for you and me and everyone else who is not the best.

Until Jesus appeared on the scene, you had to apply and choose to follow a rabbi hoping your credentials would impress him. But Jesus says something very different. He says, “You did not choose me—I chose you.” You didn’t go looking for a rabbi; the Rabbi was always looking for you.

It seems God takes the initiative in our lives, and worthiness has nothing to do with how God’s mind is made up. When our ancestors wandered aimlessly in the Sinai desert after leaving slavery in Egypt, it was God who took the initiative. ***“I bore you on eagles’ wing and brought you to myself.*** It’s not because you were deserving but simply because you are mine; ***you are a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.***”

St. Paul also speaks about God’s initiative in our lives, how God chooses us even when we are not choosing God. ***“While we were still sinners Christ died for us...While we were enemies we were reconciled by God through his Son, who willingly gave his life for us.”***

Getting back to Pope Francis for a moment, he said that the most profound passage in all of Scripture, for him, is the call of Matthew. That’s the passage that most speaks to Pope Francis. Matthew the despised tax collector belongs to no one. Not to belong is one of the worst feelings in the world. The Romans have no use for Matthew except to get him to do their dirty work—collect taxes off the backs of the Jews. In the eyes of his fellow Jews, Matthew is seen as a traitor. He is banned from synagogue and Temple, so he doesn’t belong to the Jews either. This nobody, who belongs to no one, hears the words of Jesus, ***“Follow me.”*** He takes only a pen with him. The pen used to falsify ledgers and rip people off becomes the pen with which he pens the Gospel of Matthew. In it, he never refers to himself as simply Matthew, but always as ***“Matthew the tax collector.”*** It’s a humbling reminder to himself of how far down he was and how high Jesus lifted him with two words: “Follow me.” Matthew pens his gospel, a gospel full of stories of Jesus eating with sinners and celebrating over lost sheep that are now found.

May you be covered in the dust of the Rabbi, Jesus, who has always had the smell of every one of his sheep.

Fr. Phil