

“What We Left Behind”
1 Corinthians 1:10-18 and Matthew 4:12-23

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Our scripture readings today are two chapters in the same story of Christian discipleship. The Gospel story of Jesus calling the fishermen away from their craft and away from their families to follow him is what we refer to as an origin story. Origin stories are one of the most popular kinds of stories you can tell. Origin stories are what we are asking when we get to know a couple and say, “How did you two meet?” Or we meet someone and say, “How did you get into teaching” or “Why did you decide to become an accountant?” It’s the story behind “Where did you grow up?”

Origin stories lay the foundation for what is to come. They are also, often, crafted and told with a certain mythology. For our own origin stories, we have a narrative that we tell that hits the important themes while leaving out the mundane details. When people ask my wife and I how we met we have a shared narrative we tell about meeting at Northampton Pride in Massachusetts. How she was volunteering for a film festival and I was looking for an organization to volunteer with. How we connected and became friends, beginning dating just a few months later. In our origin story we don’t tell the other parts of the story, some of the finer, messier details, partly because it would take half a day to explain it all, partly because some of those details are just for us, and partly because these are the broad strokes we both still agree on after 13 years. For our story, what we lift up is that it took a chance encounter and a foundation of friendship to lead to what was to come.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the origin story of the two sets of brothers is that they had a vocation already, they were fishermen, and following Jesus meant they not only left behind that

vocation but they also left behind their families. The story says, “immediately they left their nets and followed him. Immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him.” Now, I wasn’t there. But I’ve seen enough coming of age stories in real life, seen enough people leave their families to follow their dreams, to know that there is more to the story that unfolded in that “immediately.” You better believe there was a conversation with the brothers and their father about why they were abandoning the family business to go follow this unknown hippie dude across the countryside. You better believe there were words exchanged like, “Can he be trusted?” “How do you expect to pay your bills? “Don’t think you can just walk back into my boat when this guy abandons you!” Or from the sons, “You never understand me!” “I know what I’m doing, dad!” There’s a lot of story we don’t hear beneath that one word, “Immediately.”

And for the Gospel, that works. Because the point of the story is that they followed Jesus. They took a risk, they pivoted their lives, they gave up something, and they became disciples of Christ. It is a story meant to inspire. It is a story meant to remind us of the costs and rewards of discipleship. It is a story meant to point us toward the lesson that following Christ takes our whole being - it is not a side hustle or a hobby, it is our life’s work.

Which leads us to our second story. This second story is not an origin story but it comes later and gives us a peak into the daily life of the early church, the life of the later disciples twenty or so years later when the wanderlust and folklore of following Jesus has worn off, indeed Jesus himself has died and been resurrected and is no longer managing the day to day discipleship operations. His followers are deep in the reality of trying to continue this Jesus movement. They are working together to transform a moment in time into a sustainable movement, and that is hard, gritty, work.

We know it is hard, gritty work because we have this letter from Paul to the group of Christians in Corinth that is chastising them for fighting with each other. “It has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you.” You know it’s real life when you’re getting called out for misbehaving. There’s no skipping over the messiness. There’s no “immediately the church in Corinth returned to glorifying God and spreading the Good News of Christ to all who would listen!” There’s no immediately at all.

This second story is a harder one to tell. I imagine there are conflicting versions of it depending on who you ask. Perhaps even the conflict is so deep that the participants have a hard time looking up long enough to tell the story. And yet, in the course of our lifetimes, these kinds of stories are the ones that make up more of our life than our origin stories do.

This story of Paul writing to the Corinthians is the real answer to the question so many of us gloss over when we ask each other, “How are you doing?” Terrible actually, my coworkers are quarreling again. “How are you doing?” Struggling, I’m stressed out and having a hard time remembering why I got into this line of work to begin with. “How are you doing?” “Well my kids have both had crying fits and accused me of being the worst parent in the world and I haven’t had a shower in four days let alone a hot cup of coffee but I’m fine, thanks for asking.”

Is it any wonder that we have come up with a four letter F word to use to whenever we are asked, “how are you doing?” I’m fine. We’re fine. The church is fine. Work is fine. Everything is fine.

Because the real story is more complicated. We fight. We quarrel. We disagree. We get on each other’s nerves. And there is beauty and wonder and joy and celebration, but there is also stress and burnout and impossible days and moments when someone has to intercede and tell us

like Paul told the Corinthians, “Can you please pull it together? For Christ in whose name you were baptized, can you please remember why we are doing this?” The real story is more complicated at our work places across town, in our households, and here in the church. That’s not an indictment of any person, place, or organization, that is the story of life lived together. It’s messy sometimes. It’s complicated a lot of the times.

It is precisely because of the difficult moments that it is important to have more than one story that we tell. Because there is truth in the day to day struggles that Paul wrote about to the Corinthians, but there is also truth in the beauty of the origin story of Jesus calling the early disciples. Both stories reveal something about our potential, and when we are deep in one, we can call on the other to remind us of who we are, where we came from, and what led us to this place.

These two stories remind us together that a life of faith is both transcendent and grounded, it is both big picture dreaming and tiny detail living. It is both hope and compromise, joy and challenge, love and quarreling. Discipleship calls us to build the muscles together of living into both stories, making sure every character in them has a place, and working together to narrate the next chapter, whether that is a mountaintop moment or a lakeshore encounter, or the day to day drudgery back in town, in the church, behind closed doors, making decisions and praying, praying, praying they will point us back to our origin story.

It is easy to get lost in a heated moment and make that the only story. How often do we define the people around us by the thing we most disagree with them about instead of what unites us? Paul reminds us that it is what unites us that we are called to orient ourselves to, to find our way toward unity instead of stewing in what separates us. The outside world likes to tell one story, and that is of polar opposites who never come together. Are you Fox News or NPR?

Are you a socialist or a capitalist? Are you Gen X or Gen Z? Are you masculine or feminine?
What side are you staking your story in?

The Christian story is one of many different people coming together to do life together, to unite in a common belief in Christ, to work through the disagreements and the quarrels in order to find our way back to the excitement and the hope of the first disciples who were so inspired by the prophet before them that they immediately laid down their nets and got out of the boat and left their father to follow them. The Christian story is many stories told together, many stories still unfolding around us and before us and *with* us, each story containing a common thread: the love of Christ, a love so powerful that not even death could stop it, a love so powerful that its story continues to be told on pilgrimages and in mystical encounters as well as in our life right here together, in this sanctuary, down the hall in our conference rooms and Sunday school classrooms, right here in the community where we continue to find ways to unite with each other and with our neighbors. May we hear these stories and be inspired, be strengthened, and be reminded of the uniting power of God.