

## We Say Goodbye, We Say Hello

It isn't easy to say goodbye, is it? Usually goodbyes are hard. I have a friend who refuses to ever say goodbye. She feels that it's too final. Instead, she says, "See you next time." But sometimes we need to say goodbye. We need to have closure.

You haven't heard of my second son; my Bosnian refugee son. His name is Vahidin, and he said a good-bye that none of us would ever imagine having to say: his father was murdered in his village in Bosnia in the wars of ethnic cleansing in the mid 1990s. Five years later his mother showed us a video taken a week before the attack on their village. It shows three men: his father and two uncles, walking away from the camera down the road to their homes. They had just spent a better part of the day celebrating a family event. No one could have imagined then how poignant that last film would become in later years. When we met Vahidin, even though his father had been gone for several years already, it was apparent to us that at the tender age of eleven, he was not ready to accept that last good-bye.

When Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow him, they left everything behind to do that. Matthew doesn't go into much detail in telling that story. He just says that Peter and Andrew "immediately... left their nets and followed him." Then James and John "immediately... left their nets and followed him."

That is so cut and dried! And it fails in some ways to tell the whole story. It fails to convey the pain, and it fails to convey the joy. Peter and Andrew were brothers as were James and

John. They had always lived in their little village by the Sea of Galilee. They had learned the fishing trade by going out in small boats with their fathers. They had known their friends all their lives.

In those days, people lived in their home village all their lives. They were expected to do so. When they were children, they lived in the village so their parents could take care of them. When they were adults, they lived in the village to take care of their parents. When they were old, they lived in the village so their children could take care of them. That was the cycle of life. They could not easily break it. They had responsibilities to their loved ones.

They were also simple people. In the Hebrew tradition, as young men, they surely had learned the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, by heart. Did any of them have aspirations to become teachers or rabbis themselves? If they had, they chose a rabbi to follow, and he may have looked them over as not being quite "up to snuff" for taking on that depth of study. Even those who passed an initial testing period by the rabbis went through a "second cut." To become a rabbi, or a teacher, required intensive study that very few could accomplish. The usual method was what you've heard here. The prospective follower would select the rabbi that he would emulate. But Jesus turned this whole process on its head! He chose his followers and chose them from amongst the unlearned. Those chosen followers would then drop their nets and literally give up everything to follow and be like their master. Jesus chose them. They were not exceptional by human standards, but

Jesus saw in each of them a seed of capability to carry on his work of the kingdom that no one else could have seen.

And how could James and John immediately leave their father to follow Jesus? Did Jesus give them opportunity to say goodbye? I think he probably did. I think that Andrew, Peter, James, and John must have had tearful goodbyes. They must have been excited about following Jesus. They must have been honored at being invited to go with him, but they must have found it difficult to say goodbye.

But you have to be able to say goodbye to be able to say hello. You must let go of the past to embrace the future. These men: Peter, Andrew, James, and John, were willing to do that. I find that amazing! But it cannot have been as easy as Matthew makes it sound.

It is always difficult to say goodbye to family and friends, but sometimes it is necessary. Some of us here may have left home for college or for the service. Not as many necessarily returned. The promise of a good job was not always where we had grown up.

But that isn't why Andrew, Peter, James, and John left their village. They went because Jesus called them to a new life. He calls us to a new life, too. That does not always require leaving old friends behind, but sometimes it does.

Sometimes we have to say goodbye to say hello. Sometimes you must let go of the past to embrace the future. When Christ calls us to become his disciples, he calls us to become new

people. He calls us to allow the old person to die so that the new person can be reborn. Sometimes that requires a dramatic break with our past.

Andrew, Peter, James, and John had been fishermen. Jesus said, "Come follow me, and you will no longer be fishermen, you will be fishers of men!" That might sound sexist to us because it fails to include women, but it is a nice play on words that's easy to remember. "You will no longer be fishermen. You will become fishers of men!"

Andrew, Peter, James, and John had to leave behind their old profession so that they could carry out their new mission as Jesus' disciple. Could you do that? Could you leave behind everything to follow him? It isn't easy. Sometimes it requires sacrifice.

God doesn't call most of us to change professions; God doesn't call most of us to die for our faith; but God does call all of us to become new people and to live lives that are different as a result of having met his son, Jesus.

Today I am saying goodbye of a different kind to you. Since September, I have had the honor and blessing of worshipping with all of you here at the First Presbyterian Church of Byron. When I first came, I had no idea what was in store for me. Like Andrew, Peter, James, and John, I was told to "Follow" where he would lead me. He brought me here, and in five months I have touched many of your lives, as you in turn have touched mine. I've grown closer to my savior in ways that I would never have imagined! Jesus calls us to follow him at all costs. I know that my following brings me to this place in my life. And

now I will go from here to another congregation to learn more skills.

Just as Jesus called Andrew, Peter, James, and John, he calls us. He has a special job for each of us, but a similar call to all of us. "Follow me," he calls.

How can we respond? Recently I heard from a friend who was flying on a small airline in the Northwest. A flight attendant asked the man in the row ahead of her if he would like dinner. He asked, "What are my choices?" The flight attendant responded, "Yes or no!"

When Jesus says, "Follow me" we might ask, "What are my choices?" Jesus responds, "Yes or no!" Not "Later!" Not "Maybe!" Not "After I take care of my business!" Not "When is more convenient?" Just "Yes or no!"

Christ calls each of us to be his disciples. He calls each of us to follow him faithfully every day. Answer "Yes," and he will give you a renewed sense of purpose. Answer "Yes," and he will make your life count.

When Peter and Andrew answered "Yes," they said "hello" to a new and unknown life, and Jesus made them fishers of men. When James and John answered "Yes," they said "hello" to a new world they would never have imagined, and Jesus gave them power to change people's lives. When Jesus calls you – and he is calling you today – answer "Yes," and see how he will make a "hello" he will make something new – something wonderful – out of your life.

There's a hymn in the Presbyterian hymnbook that's become a favorite of mine over the past few years. It was written originally in Spanish, and I first heard it during a service of worship with some migrant farm workers who were living and working at the end of my road. The words in that language are beautiful, but rather than impress you with my foreign language ability, I'm going to share with you the words to the song. It's called, "Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore"

Lord, You have come up to the lakeshore,  
looking neither for wise nor for wealthy,  
You only wanted that I should follow.

O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me  
And while smiling, have called out my name.  
Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me.  
Now with you, I will seek other seas

You know that I own so little  
In my boat there's no money or weapons,  
You'll only find there my nets and labor.

You need the caring of my hands.  
Through my tiredness, may others find resting.  
You need a love that just goes on loving.

You, who have fished other oceans,  
Ever longed for by souls that are waiting  
My dear and good friend, as thus you call me.