

Recruiting for Jesus, Judaism, and Justice

Mark 1:14-20

There's a grassroots movement afloat in this country for social change—for equality, for civil rights, for institutional accountability, and for an end to policies that harm the most vulnerable. This might describe a whole host of causes that have made similar claims over the past few years and decades. Many of them work for common goals—racial justice, civil rights for the LGBTQQ citizens, immigration protections and reform, economic fairness, and political democracy.

This weekend, women across the country are marching in at least 250 cities and towns to advance their cause and social standing in this society—a movement for human dignity and equality that actually has its roots as far back as the mid-1800s. Yesterday, thousands of women returned to the nation's capital as a reprise to last year's historic march on Washington; similar marches occurred in New York, Boston, Hartford, and other cities and towns all across the fruited plain. Given the “#Me too” and “Time's Up” campaigns of the past several months that have already brought down some of the giants of entertainment and politics, there is even added energy to the protests. It is galvanizing women of all ages and walks of life. As one of the co-founders of the woman's march has said: “We are the leaders we've been waiting for. Now's the time to step up.”¹

Even when social movements are successful and historic, such as the Women's Suffrage Movement, inspired by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or the Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, or gay rights with leaders like Harvey Milk or Sylvia Rivera, social and cultural changes don't necessarily last, as

¹ Laura Bassett, “Here's What to Know About the 2018 Women's March,” *Huffington Post*, January 15, 2018.

counterforces and reactionary movements often arise as well, as we've recently seen. But over time, it would appear the fairness quotient will win out (at least as we've seen here in the U.S.), as justice cannot easily deny equality once it takes root deep in the soil of culture, altering the character of society for good.

It's not hard for me to find parallels between the social movements of our time and when Jesus recruited his first followers, because campaigns and causes of all types typically begin in much the same manner: there's a charismatic leader who speaks to the heart of an issue of concern and people rally around to join the cause. Eventually stirring words lead to important actions, a campaign begins, people are recruited, and it turns into a social movement. Everyone who joins may share a common hope and vision, but likely have little agreement over where it will eventually lead, especially when it results in an outcome quite different than most foresee.

This is how I imagine the Jesus movement began. It likely wasn't as simple as "one-two-three, follow me", but began like other campaigns of its type. Despite what it looks like in our text for today, Peter and Andrew, James and John, most likely were not uninstructed novices or random recruits to Jesus' beck and call; he would have chosen those who were ready to commit their lives to this Galilean grassroots effort to seek social and religious reform in first-century Galilee and Judea and the corrupted practices of Judaism.

Granted, when you read the Gospels, they don't usually give that impression. Mark, for example, used clean, abbreviated lines to draw his picture of the calling of the first disciples.

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them,

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

The same was true of James and John, the sons of Zebedee—they immediately left their work to follow Jesus. But all it takes is a little common sense to recognize this sort of random recruiting isn’t likely to have happened. It is reasonable to assume Mark left out an entire story within a story by suggesting they met Jesus by chance and immediately left their livelihoods to follow him without a second thought. Would this happen in this way? Probably not. Nor did Mark explain what Jesus meant when he said they would “fish for people.”

New Testament scholar, James Tabor, offers us some insight into what might have been a more credible scenario—the story behind the story—including the relationship between John the Baptizer and Jesus, whose mission and followers were very much the same—some would say, many of John’s followers turned to Jesus, when he continued the ministry upon John’s arrest and subsequent execution.

The historical facts are plain: Jesus joined the movement of John the Baptizer and was baptized by John with a “baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” He then linked up with John in a strategic move to reach the whole country at once. Jesus was preaching and practicing that same baptism—the baptism of John. They were allies and there is no reason to think that either their message or their mode of operation differed.

According to Tabor, John baptized in the north nearer the Sea of Galilee, while Jesus baptized toward the south toward Judea. He goes on:

It appears certain that Jesus’ mother, brothers, and sisters responded to the baptism of John, as well as all those working with him as “disciples,” including Peter and Andrew, the fishermen James and John, Philip, Nathanael, and all the rest.²

² James Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty*, Simon and Schuster, 2006, pg.149.

So, it would seem, then, that Jesus' disciples were already familiar with the campaign begun by John and were primed and ready when Jesus took up his mantle and continued the mission.

What was the mission identified with this call to discipleship—normally cloaked in the traditional play on words, “fishermen” becoming “fishers of men”? Ched Myers, provides us some additional context:

There is perhaps no expression more traditionally misunderstood than Jesus' invitation to these workers to become “fishers of men” (1:17). This metaphor, despite the grand old tradition of missionary interpretation, does not refer to the “saving of souls,” as if Jesus were conferring upon these men instant evangelist status. Rather, the image is carefully chosen from Jeremiah 16:16, where it is used as a symbol of Yahweh's censure of Israel. Elsewhere the “hooking of fish” is a euphemism for judgment upon the rich (Amos 4:2) and powerful (Ezekiel 29:4). Taking this mandate for his own, Jesus is inviting common folk to join him in his struggle to overturn the existing order of power and privilege.

...This “first” call to discipleship in Mark is an urgent, uncompromising invitation to “break with business as usual” [symbolized in the immediate departure from their employment]. The world [as they knew it] was coming to an end, for those who choose to follow. The kingdom has dawned, and it is identified with the discipleship adventure.³

So, what we have in this passage is not the traditional notion of following Christ to simply save one's soul from eternal death, but instead a call to join a prophetic mission to take on and transform the present order from the unjust rule of the powerful over the powerless to a world of shalom and just relationships, free of oppression, violence, and inequality. What this means is, Jesus wasn't calling his followers to be evangelists to bring about religious converts. Instead, they were being called to join Jesus in a league of prophets who would reform the current system of institutional Judaism and their world in accordance with the just and righteous ways of God—the “good news” of the gospel being that human oppression in Israel was about to come to an end with the imminent arrival of the realm of God: “The time

³ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, Orbis, Tenth Anniversary Ed., 2008, pp. 132, 133.

is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” The end is near; take heart, for the world was about to change for the better. The basic purpose of this gospel movement was to proclaim this good news—a movement that began initially with John, who had been calling their society into account. Jesus recruited those who were already committed to this cause, so they joined him to transform Judaism and their world with divine mercy and justice. That is how the gospel movement began.

So, what happened? Did they succeed? Yes, at first, especially as Jesus’ popularity grew as the leader of this nonviolent movement. Jesus was following in his mentor’s wake and doing greater things than John in healing people and teaching crowds. The lives of many burdened people in Galilee were being radically transformed for the better, as examples of what life was like when God’s Spirit entered the world. As the story goes, there was every expectation among Jesus’ disciples that the culmination of this redemptive mission would come at Passover in Jerusalem, when the miracles of Yahweh would transform the entire nation of Israel from judgment to ultimate redemption with the fall of the Herodian powers and Rome’s oppressive rule.

Except it never worked out that way. As we know, opposition always rises up against social movements, and in this case, the opposition was fierce and powerful. The movement led by Jesus wasn’t any more successful than other insurrections in ending the imperial rule. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesus was martyred for a cause that didn’t result in fulfilling its goal of total transformation of his world. Though Jesus’ life was symbolic of that ultimate objective of bringing God’s reign to earth, like

Dr. King, in time it became more about *revering the man* than maintaining the movement.

Thus, over the centuries the Christian message was effectively rewritten—from one of social and religious transformation to one solely about Jesus as the Son of God bringing personal redemption—a message that largely ignores the status quo in society which, for the most part, has defined the church’s mission ever since. As we inherit it, we receive the call to discipleship as mainly a personal religious decision to be a Christian and make this spiritual journey to become a better person through the forgiveness of our sins and the ongoing transformation of our souls. Social justice is secondary at best. Though personal redemption is often necessary and important for any of us, it is not an end unto itself. Divine redemption is intended for the world, not merely individual lives. Certainly, securing personal salvation was not what Jesus had in mind when he issued the call to Peter and Andrew, James and John, as he came to them on that fateful day.

However, one thing never changed from that day until now. That is, the call to discipleship is one to take up the cross and follow Jesus. The cross we take up, however, is not the sentimentally romantic, “Old Rugged Cross” that takes away all our sins and moral stains, as much as it serves as a powerful symbol of the cost of joining a movement that keeps pounding the drumbeat for justice even when principalities and powers jealously and cruelly oppose it every step of the way. Those principalities and powers took Jesus’ life and that of many of his original disciples. If we carry that cross far enough, it will take much of our own lives standing up to them. But that is what it is to bear the cross of Christ in its most essential meaning.

There will be many days when cynicism tells you it isn't convenient or worth the effort. There will be years when it seems as if the realm of God is unattainable—impossible to achieve. In certain times, that's true—just like it was for the earliest disciples. Their world collapsed to ruin before it was renewed—first with the startling death of Jesus, then with the stunning destruction of Jerusalem.

But, over the course of time, the world has come a long way from what it was like 2000 years ago. Human dignity, equality, and justice have come to the center of our social consciences—on behalf of women, racial and religious minorities, and those of any standing who are marginalized and treated unfairly. Those who still experience harassment or oppression at the hand of more powerful people continue to rise up and proclaim the truth of the gospel—if not for the present, then for those down the road who pick up the mantle in their generation to carry it forth.

Heaven does not come to earth without strong opposition. The truth does not easily set people free. It never has and never will. But the call to discipleship will remain the same: to pursue the righteousness of God in real life ways—symbolized as it may be in religious ceremony, but practiced every day in the ethics of justice and right relations, in fairness, in decency, in the pursuit of what is right, in the rejection of what is wrong, in protecting the vulnerable, and in lifting up the dignity of those who are undervalued within human community. That is the nature of a world of shalom.

The parallels with Jesus' call to discipleship are found in the spirit of so many social movements, especially those in U.S. history, including abolition, emancipation, women's suffrage, child labor laws, civil rights, voting rights, women's equality, Stonewall, peace movement, Black Lives

Matter, and immigrant rights. These social causes (among many others) are often evidence that we can collectively resist the powers and live into the gospel truths of Jesus, who has called us to follow him.

As Jesus announced when he accepted this call:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18, 19)

That is what makes us fishers of people, who will be drawn to this central concern of human existence. For that is the way of Jesus, and the truth of Judaism, and the life of justice, which ultimately leads us on the path to God's realm of shalom.

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