

Immediately [Scott Kinder-Pyle]

Matthew 4:12—23; 1 Corinthians 1:10—18

Maybe you've noticed. Or maybe you've given 'Notice.' Maybe, if you were here last week, you noticed a difference in the pace with which the first disciples gather alongside Jesus. Last week, two of the proteges of John the Baptist spend a whole afternoon with Jesus and eventually reach out to Simon Peter. (Later, Nathaniel is lounging beneath a fig tree.) No one seems to be in a hurry. And yet, this morning, Matthew's Gospel offers a different version of how the coming-after Jesus goes down. It goes down IMMEDIATELY.

Verse 20: ***"Immediately [Simon and Andrew] left their nets and followed him."***

Verse 22: ***"Immediately [James and John] left the boat and their father, and followed him."***

Did you notice? Have you given 'Notice'? You see, I'm wondering why they seemed to be in such a hurry to leave the tools of their trade (and in the case of James and John, their father). Was it just the charismatic authority of this former carpenter's apprentice—his tone of voice—the look in his eyes? And it's not as if Jesus were offering them a more lucrative line of work. They would be leaving—IMMEDIATELY—for God knows what!—almost as if their lives had been preparing them to leave. In fact, biblical scholars and historians claim that first century fishermen of their sort would have felt stuck. They were bound to the Roman Empire's bureaucrats who gave them license to fish; and so, no matter the size of their catch and no matter the potential for making a profit, Roman tariffs, taxes and tributes ate in them. So it was soul-sucking work to see all your energies depleted for sake of the ego-centric sycophants in Jerusalem or the deified, braggadocious Caesar in Rome. But else could they do?

Well, they could quit. They could stop utilizing the skills they've learned for the sake of Empire and start using them to pursue honest-to-goodness, forgiving, face-to-face relationships. They could 'fish' for people. In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Ann Lamott compares the mysterious presence of God to a stray cat following her around and getting caught up in her footsteps. The author says she was too hung over to the stand for the songs at church and the sermon seemed "so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of extraterrestrials..." But—

I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said . . . 'I quit.' I took a long deep breath and said out loud, 'All right. You can come in.'"

Now, it's the 'I QUIT' nature of the encounter that helps me understand how those original disciples of Jesus may have felt called. They had come to a point where the pressure to conform and to capitulate to the 'Empire' became too much. And they were disgusted with themselves. So, in a sense, Simon, Andrew, James and John quit *themselves*—or they quit the persons who had become cogs in the machine, pawns on the Empire's chessboard. And when I consider the pressure we feel to conform, I get why it has to happen IMMEDIATELY. Jesus has told them—and tells us—about "a kingdom of heaven." But, you see, it's not a kingdom of wispy, white clouds and streets of gold to which we go after we've worked hard and paid our taxes. The one who calls the disciples claims that it's near, very close; HEAVEN'S AT HAND—*IMMEDIATELY PRESENT*—unmediated by theories and stereotypes. And if we try to put it off till the moment of death, we'll be missing the point of it, the vanguard of it. And we'd be giving to the Herod's and the Caesar's of the world the power to hold us down and keep us in check.

Martin Luther King, Jr. went to jail. And while incarcerated in Birmingham, Alabama he read what all the white clergymen were saying. They said, ‘*Civil Rights could wait.*’ They said, the injustice of racism needed more time to resolve, and Christians shouldn’t be so hard on themselves because the Kingdom of Heaven on earth takes time. They said, it happens gradually. And yet, to all these accommodations, Martin Luther King replied with “THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW.”

In the 1975 film, *Network*, a news anchor has a nervous breakdown, but somehow gets on the air; and in a live-broadcast he tells his faithful audience, “I want you to go to your window, open the window and shout, ‘I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.’” In other words, he’s not just quitting his job, his prominent position; he’s abandoning the whole empire of ego! He’s quitting the rat race and the system! But what’s next? Jesus, in Matthew’s Gospel, offers a possibility. In relationships that we have right before us, there’s another window that’s been opened for us. And the call coming through this window is annoyingly immediate.

- *You mean, right now, Jesus?*
- *You mean, I’m fishing for non-transactional, genuine-loving relationships right now?*
- *You mean, the words we pray in the Lord’s Prayer—‘Your kingdom come on earth, Your will be done on earth’—aren’t just words that we can put off for later?*
- *You mean, when I attend worship at Northwood Presbyterian Church, the point of it isn’t so that I can boast about going to heaven when I die, but I can encounter a ‘heavenly’ formed moment of reconciliation, forgiveness and compassion right now?*
- *You mean, it’s all as close as my hand—and the hand of the person right in front of me?*

Christian Wiman had cancer and he was dying. He went to a church in downtown Chicago, but he was still dying. And took no comfort in the idea of a heaven as a consolation. But then, on the streets of Chicago, he noticed a hand. He was given notice of a hand: .

"I turned around to see him half-running ... toward me as he tried to pull a flannel shirt on over his T-shirt, careful not to trip over his untied shoes. I was in no mood to chat, especially not to an enthusiastic preacher, and all my thoughts were hostile. But I stopped... he asked if he could walk me to the train station. Those days were a blur to me, but I remember two things from the morning very clearly. I remember Matt straining to find some language that would be true to his own faith and calling and at the same time adequate to the tragedy and the faithlessness—the tragedy of faithlessness—that he perceived in me. And I remember when we parted there was an awkward moment... and in a gesture that I'm sure was completely unconscious, he placed his hand over his heart just for a second... It sliced right through me." *[My Bright Abyss]*.

Immediately! When the things of faith happen *immediately—when they are at hand*—it means there's already been a lot of preparation. Immediately! It means the pressure of living and dying in the false world of the self-sufficient egos and cogs in the machine have been building and building...Corrie Ten Boom survived the Nazi occupation of her country during World War Two. In her book, *The Hiding Place*, she then recounts a moment of immediacy that had been building for a long time:

"It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsey's pain-blanchered face. He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. 'How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein.' He said. 'To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!' His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who preached so often to the people ... the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness. As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me..."

Now, I want to be as clear as can be: if you've never felt that kind of lightning-bolt love electrifying your hand, that's okay. What we're talking about today is *not* that you and I *have* done such things—so get with the program. No, no, no. What we're talking about is how the pressure you and I are feeling day-to-day and night-to-night will lead to a moment when Jesus calls. And when he calls, we'll be challenged—commanded, really—to respond IMMEDIATELY. And we won't be asked to brag about our religion—or how many times we've read the Bible cover-to-cover. And we won't be asked to gossip about our neighbors and to vilify our enemies. And we won't be asked to serve on a committee or to sing in the choir. We won't even be asked. The Kingdom of Heaven will be right there—as it was for Simon and Andrew, James and John—not asking us, but telling us: YOU'RE NO LONGER FISHERS FOR THE EMPIRE OF EGO. QUIT THAT! LEAVE THAT BEHIND! GIVE NOTICE! HAVE YOU NOTICED?

HAVE YOU NOTICED IF YOU'VE GIVEN 'NOTICE'?