

The first draft lottery was when I was a college sophomore. I watched as each birthday received a number, the lower the number of your birthday, the more likely you were to be drafted. When my birthday received the number 21, there was no doubt what would happen when my student deferment expired at graduation. Uncle Sam would say come, follow me and I'd soon be in the Army.

Even though Viet Nam was winding down, most draftees were headed that direction. The popular press of the time did not paint a very positive picture of military officers. I had met a few that were well, underwhelming. I wondered if character traits like integrity, ethics, even intelligence were major requirements to be commissioned. The Army would send me out into the jungle somewhere, put some officer with a few months of training in authority over me, and expect me to obey. I really did not want some incompetent character yelling at me to do something stupid, something that could easily get me killed. The idea of some lieutenant charging into an ambush screaming "Follow Me!" and expecting me to get out from behind a big tree and follow, just did not appeal to me. I guess my imagination raised too many concerns, too many objections.

So, I managed to talk my way into Infantry Officers' Candidate School. If there were to be a fool in charge, I'd like it to be me. As they tried to teach us to be leaders, my imagination continued to play with the Infantry School's motto of "Follow Me!"

Part of my imagination wondered exactly how confident I would be that others would respond if, in the midst of battle, I ever cried out: "Follow Me!" I wondered if the troops would have the same reservations about following me that I had of following others. Would they think about how well they knew me, what my character was like, whether they really trusted me with their lives? Would they think about exactly what I am asking them to do, whether it made sense, whether there was a chance of success, of coming out alive. Would they sit there for awhile and intellectually ponder the odds, asking themselves: "Why, or why, should I follow him?"

Once commissioned, I found that I liked the Army, even though it came with a very weird employment contract. I often described the contract between myself and Uncle Sam this way: the Army can tell me to do whatever it pleases, send me anywhere in the world, whenever it wants to, and let anyone shoot at me with whatever weapons they desire. In return, Uncle Sam will pay me what Uncle Sam thinks I am worth.

Is that the type of contract that you would be willing to continually risk your life for? Wouldn't you like a few more specifics? Perhaps a better idea of exactly what all the Army might ask you to do? Perhaps limiting exactly where in the world it might send you? Maybe a promise that you would always get the bigger and better weapon. Perhaps an assurance that if the other side didn't play fair, you could go home. Perhaps an exorbitant salary that make all the risk and unknowns seem worthwhile. Maybe just tangible support for the dream that you could keep the peace and we would never have to wage war again.

Imagine sitting in a boat, fishing. This fishing is a little harder than throwing a line over the side and drinking a cold soda waiting for a fish to come along. You are throwing nets out, pulling them back in. Trying to catch enough fish to make a living, not an easy life. At least its better than being a shepherd - at least you know where you will sleep each night. The boat is the most critical element of your life: it is where you work, the source of food and income. Even your dreams center on the boat, someday being able to buy additional boats, hiring others to fish, having a more comfortable life.

Suddenly, there is this man standing on the shore. You have no idea who he is, who he thinks he is. You know the other fishermen of the area, he isn't one of them; so who is he? Who is his family? What does he want you to do? There have been some strange people around, claiming to be the anointed one of God, who generally got themselves, and their followers, killed.

The man on the shore calls out to you and your brother: "Come, follow me. I will make you fishers of people." This idea of being a fisher of people makes absolutely no

sense whatsoever! Follow him where? There is no promise of an easy life, no promise even of a salary. In fact, there are no promises at all! As you sit there and ponder the odds: “What will happen if I follow this stranger, what will happen if I don't?” it seems pretty clear what you ought to do. Why, oh why, would you even think of getting out of your boat?

Yet, those early fishermen did get out of their boats, left their families, jobs. They followed a stranger and a vague promise that they did not even understand.

That same stranger on the shore still calls to us, today. He still says: “Come. Follow me.” It doesn't matter what those fishermen did two thousand years ago. What matters is how we respond, today, in terms of what God wants done, today. Sure, we now know more about who he is. Having God as his father pretty well establishes his family connection. His character has always been beyond reproach: he has never made a promise that has been broken, never been caught in an unethical situation, never told a partial truth just to soothe our ears.

Yet, we still hear frightful stories of those who have followed. Some have followed him into remote ambushes and been killed. Others have given up comfortable jobs, careers and pensions, and gone to the ends of the earth to live in poverty. True, these may be the exceptions; most who have followed him keep their day jobs, stay in the same town, live with their families, retire. But those who answer, who follow, find that there are no guarantees, no employment contracts, health insurance or golden parachutes, at least in earthly terms.

What is it that he wants us to do, today? Why, oh why, would we even think of getting out of our boats?

The answer to the what and why of following Jesus is different for each of us yet there are some commonalities. Foremost, faith changes us. When Jesus calls us, when we respond in faith, we will change and be changed. We do not respond out of self-serving intellectual analysis, but in the faith that there is a God, and God is calling us.

Responding based on a God given faith itself is an indication of a dramatic change in our lives, especially when we may not fully understand who Jesus is or what it means to follow him today. Faith, even if it takes us into the midst of hardship, provides the answer to why we should get out of our boat: to trust and serve God.

Second, there is action; one can not follow while still sitting behind a rock, in a boat, or even a pew. There is risk in this, for to follow means to trust someone else, to believe that where they are leading us to is worth the risk. There is also an acceptance in our action; Jesus did not call out “Come. Lead me” or even “Come. Lead for me.” When we commit to follow, we accept a vision, we declare that we are willing to work towards that vision. We follow. As Albert Schweitzer observed, Jesus fully reveals himself to those who obey, those who in toils, conflicts, and sufferings experience his fellowship. This is when we discover who has called us.

As we follow, we join, even lead, in worship and prayer. We might join the mission trip to Mexico, finding used wheelchairs for those who have none. Following may be calling friends who haven't made it to church in a few weeks and seeing how they are doing. Following Jesus may be seeing a classmate in the midst of a rough day and offering encouragement. Action provides the what, the details, of “Follow me.”

Following also has a purpose and expectation: Jesus stated it clearly: “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near.” When Jesus calls to us to come and follow, as Dwight Moody phrases it, it is time to turn and face God. It is time to let our imaginations be unleashed, to imagine what it is like to be face to face with the God of the universe, with the Creator God, who loves each of us. When we turn, we see who it is who calls us. We hear afresh the promises of love, peace, eternal life which flow from God's presence. When we turn and face God, we have complete confidence that the one we follow is worth the risk. We understand that success is not measured by wealth or fame or comfort; success is measured by our answering the call, by actively following, by turning to face God.

Once we follow, once we respond to Jesus who calls us, we wonder why did we ever linger in the pews asking ourselves: “Why, oh why, would I even think of getting out of my boat?” For in faith, in the very act of following, we do find the answer.