**Jesus calls his first disciples**

**John 1:35-51**

**35**The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, **36**and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” **37**The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. **38**When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” **39**He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. **40**One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was **Andrew, Simon Peter’s** brother. **41**He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). **42**He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

**43**The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found **Philip** and said to him, “Follow me.” **44**Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. **45**Philip found **Nathanael** and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

**46**Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” **47**When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” **48**Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” **49**Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” **50**Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” **51**And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

**Mark 1:14-20**

**14**Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, **15**and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near repent, and believe in the good news.”

**16**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. **17**And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” **18**And immediately they left their nets and followed him. **19**As he went a little farther, he saw **James** son of Zebedee and his brother **John**, who were in their boat mending the nets. **20**Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

We are looking at two sections of the gospel stories this morning. One section comes from last week’s lectionary reading somewhat expanded: John 1:35-51. The other section is this morning’s lectionary passage: Mark 1:14-20.

These passages describe the very early days of Jesus’s movement, a movement that started, let’s say, around A.D. 30 and continues to this day. *We* are part of this movement, an astonishing thing in the world that something would last so long. So, we are naturally curious about our origins. And because we believe in the primacy of Jesus’s example and teaching, we want to learn from him how to welcome people into the movement.

In the passage from Mark’s gospel, we find Jesus, after the arrest of John, declaring the theme of his movement: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near repent, and believe in the good news.” Soon after, we find him calling four disciples: two sets of brothers: Simon and Andrew, and James and John.

In the passage from the gospel of John, we get two stories. First, we see John the Baptist pointing out Jesus as the Lamb of God to two of John’s disciples. These were Andrew and an unnamed disciple, perhaps the John who would become the apostle and the named author of this gospel. Andrew then tells his brother, Simon, that Jesus is the Messiah, and Simon, renamed Peter by Jesus, joins the movement. I think this story is not inconsistent with Mark’s account. John tells of their first encounters; Mark tells of when Jesus calls them to a complete break from their previous occupations to literally follow him.

The second story is about Philip and Nathaniel. Jesus himself calls Philip, who most likely knew Andrew and Peter, because they were from the same village. Philip, like Andrew, tells Nathaniel that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. Nathaniel is probably the disciple known as Bartholomew in the other gospels. Bartholomew looks more like a last name – probably Bar-Tolmi, or “Son of Tolmi.” Nathaniel is skeptical at first, but is convinced – more about that in a minute.

One question that came to my mind as I reading this: How old were these men? To be honest, we don’t really know. But there is an interesting story in Matthew 17:24–27, where Peter asks Jesus if they should pay the temple tax. Jesus says yes, and miraculously produces the money, enough for Peter and Jesus. We know that Peter was married, and thus probably older than the other disciples. Further, the temple tax was only paid by Jewish men who were at least 20 years old. Most people think Jesus was about thirty. But this means the other disciples being mentioned here were under twenty years old! How many of you are under twenty?

We tend to think of the apostles in their later days, mature and hardened, perhaps remembering that it is believed that all or almost all of them were killed for their faith. But here they are, pretty raw youth.

In fact, it’s important to remember that it looks like some or all of these early disciples first came to John the Baptist. Philip and “the other disciple” definitely were. John’s message was a harsh one, a strong call to repentance and change. He didn’t think his listeners were people who were fine just the way they were, and maybe only needed a little tune-up. No, he called them a brood of vipers who needed to bear fruits of repentance. They needed a radical change to be fit for the coming Messiah.

Look even at the interaction between Nathaniel and Jesus. At first, Nathaniel is skeptical of Jesus, just because he comes from Nazareth. We’d call this prejudice or maybe even racism. Yet when Jesus calls him “a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit,” Nathaniel is immediately ready to declare him King of Israel and the Son of God. There is a kind of guilelessness which is not particularly healthy or even morally good. I can almost imagine Jesus is teasing Nathaniel a bit, but it’s the kind type of teasing, because Jesus notes that Nathaniel will see real evidence of Jesus’s messianic nature.

What can we learn from Jesus’s calling these early disciples?

I want to try something out. I have been reading a 1996 book called *Exclusion and Embrace* by Miroslav Volf, a theologian now at Yale, but who was born and raised in what is now Croatia, and who lived through the terrible Serbian-Croatian conflict. In this book, Volf explores the twin concepts of exclusion and embrace. I want to talk about a kind of model on welcome and inclusion that Volf calls *embracing*. In fact, he calls it a kind of mini-drama in four acts to capture the embrace:

In Act 1, we open our arms.

In Act 2, we wait.

In Act 3, we engage in the embrace proper.

In Act 4, we release.

By the way, Volf says the image doesn’t have to be an embrace – if that makes you feel uncomfortable; it could be as simple as a handshake or a welcoming touch.

Let’s walk through this mini-drama, and then I want to go back and see how it applies to the welcome and call that Jesus gave to his early disciples.

First, we open our arms. When we do so, we are extending a welcome to the other. In fact, we are acknowledging a *need* for the other. If we were perfectly content with just ourselves, we wouldn’t need to open our arms. But we acknowledge our incompleteness, and our desire for the other. Volf says we thus acknowledge “the pain of absence and the joy of anticipated presence.” And when we stand with our arms open, *at that very moment* we are not offering a conditional embrace; we are indeed simply accepting the other just as they are, without preconditions.

But second, we wait. We “reach out but stop before touching the other.” In the waiting, we are at the border between the other person and ourselves. But we wait, because we don’t force ourselves on the other with violence. The only power we have in our waiting is “the power of signaled desire, of created space, and [the] opened boundary of the self.” It is the opposite of violence.

This is a risky place to be. We don’t know what the outcome will be. We don’t know if the other person will accept the embrace, or will reject us, or if will cause harm down the line. Volf says, “only one outcome is not possible: a genuine embrace cannot leave both or either completely unchanged.”

But, assuming the other person accepts the embrace, the third act is the embrace itself, as we enclose our arms around each other. It’s reciprocal: “two pairs of arms” are required “for one embrace.” Each of us enters the space of the other. It requires a proper touch, not too tepid, not too hard. We enjoy the intimacy and the otherness of each other.

The final act is the release: we have to stop the embrace, and become just ourselves again, enriched, of course, from our encounter. To hold on too would be, well, creepy, even violent.

Now I’d like to use this “mini-drama” or model to think about how Jesus welcomed and embraced these earliest disciples.

I suppose the first question that comes to mind for me is to ask to whom did Jesus offer this welcome? To be clear, these are just a few of the stories, and they are stories of some of the men whom he chooses as his twelve apostles, so not every case is covered. But still I think I see a few things of interest.

First, he welcomed some because they had been with John the Baptist. John’s ministry, it is to be remembered, was to make straight the way for the coming messiah, to prepare the way of the Lord. So it is entirely appropriate that John had prepared them to follow Jesus.

Second, I think Jesus certainly had a Spirit-led insight into whom to call. His seeing Nathaniel by the fig tree and his insight into what would provoke Nathaniel in just the right way is a case of the Spirit’s work. We know that before he called the twelve to an apostleship, he spent the night in prayer, seeking the Father’s wisdom.

Third, Jesus had good news for *everyone*, he began to preach generally, to “fish” with a wide net, announcing the nearness of the coming reign of God and a need for repentance. These men heard these selfsame words.

The second question to come to mind to me is to ask they accepted the embrace. Jesus made the call to follow him, and these did.

We mentioned John, and John’s testimony was enough for some of them. Jesus’s reputation made it easier for them to accept the embrace.

Also, it’s clear that there are some “friends and family referrals” going on. Andrew tells his brother, Simon. Philip told his friend, Nathaniel. Brothers James and John are together, and are called together. It’s easier to trust when trustworthy people make the recommendation.

Finally, I want to ask what was Jesus welcoming them into? In some sense, his “embrace” lasted three years, which is how long many people believe the twelve were with Jesus. This was not an easy three years – foxes had homes, but the Son of Man had no where to lay his head, and neither did his disciples. And, at the end, they watched one of their own betray Jesus. They watched Jesus being tortured, and then murdered. But then they experienced the resurrection, and they were released to continue the movement Jesus started, in the power of that resurrection and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Let me suggest something for this week. I’m wondering if there is anything we can learn from this model and these Bible stories about welcoming people you know with a message about following Jesus, offering your embrace and his embrace.

* Can you spend some time in prayer, asking God to give you a kind of Spirit-led insight that he gave to Jesus, insight about whom you might talk to?
* Is there anyone who trusts you, a friend or family member, who might be willing at this time to hear a word about Jesus?
* Are there any areas of brokenness that you need to confess to anyone in order to clear the way to greater trust?
* Can you trust God to protect you even as you take on the risk of embracing others?

Let us pray:

God of welcome and embrace, thank you for embracing and welcoming us. Give us your Spirit’s insight into how we might tell others about the good news of the reign of God and a call to repentance. Help us to put our trust in you so we can take on the risks opening up our arms to others entails. In Jesus’s name, Amen.