

OUTLANDISH
AN UNLIKELY MESSIAH
A MESSY MINISTRY
AND THE CALL TO MOBILIZE

DEREK PENWELL



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Introduction

In the 24-hour period following the election of Donald Trump on November 8, 2016, I received three messages—none of them from church people. And they were not just people who didn't go to the church I serve—they were not associated with *any* church.

One message came from a recent Syrian refugee, whose family our congregation co-sponsored as they made America their new home. He wanted to know if the election meant he and his family would have to return to a refugee camp in another, more dangerous part of the world, after having only been here for four months.

Another message came from a lesbian with whom I'd gone to grad school, wanting to know if I would perform her wedding before the inauguration. She and her partner had been planning a June 2017 wedding in England, but they no longer felt as if they had the luxury of waiting.

The third message came from a Pakistani Muslim friend who's a gerontologist here in town. He said, "What do I do, Derek? Today at work the other doctors were high-fiving because of the election...right in front of me. These guys are my friends. I was devastated to think that they never stopped to consider how I might feel after last night. They know my two nine-year-old sons, who today I'm very frightened for. I don't know what to do. I'm not sure what's going to happen to us."

I thought: *I'm a Christian pastor, for God's sake. Why call me?*

I'm nobody special, so I suspect the reason they called has something to do with the assumption that people who follow Jesus will not stand for the kinds of terrorizing acts my friends were certain were to follow from this administration. That's a pretty powerful statement about what followers of Jesus, at their best, may represent to people afraid the powers and principalities are now arrayed against them.

What is it about Jesus that calls to people? What is that makes people think that, even though they themselves have no commitment to Jesus, he and his people represent something different from the troubled politics of division and distrust—something that reassures people that, when the black boots come, people committed to the Jesus they’ve heard about in the Gospels will stand up and say “no” to any authority that discounts the weak, that grinds the poor and the powerless to dust? Where do the people who call themselves by Jesus’ name get the resources to live this life of faithful resistance, of holy political subversion?

This book is an attempt to get to the bottom of these questions.

The divided nature of American politics underscores the assumption that, when we say “politics,” what we mean is partisan politics—the kind of thing we hear people screaming at each other about on cable news shows. But politics, for Jesus, transcends the kind of easy partisan labels we attach to our ideological tribes.

When I talk about Jesus as a political subversive, I’m neither suggesting that he is some brand of anarchist, nor that he has a stake in one partisan tribe over another, leading him to cast the other sides’ partisan money changers out of the political temple. In fact, for my purposes in this book, I want to talk about politics as a set of commitments that Jesus’ followers embrace as a result of their devotion to him and to his vision of God’s new reign of peace and justice¹—prior to and formative of any partisan commitments. That is to say, Jesus’ followers don’t know what to think about partisan politics without first understanding those politics as either bringing us closer to or driving us further from the world that Jesus announces is breaking in upon us.

Jesus offers a new kind of politics that is always concerned about the formation of a different kind of community (or, in Greek, *polis*—from whence we get the word *political*), in which the needs of the oppressed and disempowered take their rightful place in the front of our consciousness, while the needs of the folks who drive BMWs and walk the corridors of power in Brooks Brothers suits get pushed way down on the priority list. As a consequence, Jesus redefines what it means to be a *political subversive*: one who turns the common structuring of political systems upside down. These political systems allow the wealthy and the powerful to call all the shots in ways that further entrench their

1 I’m aware of the difficulties that come with the phrase, “kingdom of God.” I will usually, therefore, opt for the phrase “reign of God.” However, in some cases, as a means of direct contrast with the kingdoms of this world, I will use “kingdom of God.” By either of these two interchangeable terms, I mean roughly the same thing—a new world over which God rules, where the peace and justice that has eluded so many will finally be accessible to all.

wealth and power, regardless of how the poor and the powerless are affected. Political subversion completely reorients not only the “taken-for-grantedness” of those systems, but our very conception of what’s possible for the people polite society always has a nasty habit of writing off.

Jesus is a difficult case. Indeed, it’s not immediately clear why anyone would have wanted to follow him in the first place. He was an unlikely guy to lead a revolution, what with his feeble pedigree as an unknown rube from a blue-collar family, hailing from the Galilean backwater of Nazareth. He had no connections to speak of, no trust fund to rely on, no savvy P.R. team to guide him through the labyrinthine world of power politics or high finance. He had no Ph.D., no MBA, no J.D., no training at the finest Rabbinical schools. As far as we know, he was never homecoming king, never presided over his college fraternity, was never voted most likely to succeed. And none of the Gospel writers ever dropped hints about a strong jaw, cleft chin, or Hollywood hair—Warner Salman’s brushwork notwithstanding.

If you ever went to high school, then you know people who seem to have everything going for them—people who have all the necessary boxes checked when it comes to potential. You probably have specific faces in mind as you’re reading this. And for most people not named Donald J. Trump (or just about every member of his cabinet), the face they imagine is probably not their own. These high school all-stars are the folks who everyone takes for granted will make a big dent in the world. How could they not? They’ve got everything necessary—charm, intelligence, good looks, great sense of humor, magnetic personality, fresh breath, and clear complexions. The question isn’t *if* with these people; it’s *when*.

But it’s amazing how often the people who appear to have straight A’s in potential early in life wind up tanking—driving around in the same red Camaro they had in twelfth grade; playing in over-40 softball leagues; polishing their all-state trophies; and reliving the glory days down at the bar over a pitcher of Miller Light, staring vaguely into the middle distance and wondering how their lives got so sidetracked.

And while those who used to be considered can’t-misses wonder where it all went wrong, the kid who always accessorized with chalk dust or wore Wal-Mart tennis shoes and served two years as president of the A.V. club winds up becoming Elon Musk or Maxine Waters. Not all the nerds grow up to be Sabrina Pasterski (google her; trust me), and not all captains of the football team grow up to be ham-and-egggers down at the plant, but enough do to make it a popular cultural trope.

Though Jesus' life isn't reducible to a modern cliché, it may help us to make sense of the odd narrative arc of his life, death, and resurrection to see him as the analog of the nobody who made a gigantic, asteroid-sized dent in the world, in spite of the fact that the deck was stacked against him. Because, let's be honest, according to the way the world usually works, Jesus should never have risen from obscurity to become the most influential person in history. He is, by any standard, an extraordinarily unlikely person to turn the world upside down. But turn the world upside down he did.

But it wasn't just that Jesus himself was an unlikely actor to simultaneously play the part of historical icon and political iconoclast; it's also the people he surrounded himself with and the high-rollers with whom he always seemed to get sideways; it's the crazy way he told stories; it's the unbelievable ethical demands he placed on people who wanted to follow him; it's his counterintuitive understanding of power and how to respond to it; it's the jaw-dropping ending to his story. All of these things make the story of Jesus such an outrageously improbable but compelling part of the great cosmic story of God's determination to have the world God wants—and the place to start if we're to see what resistance really looks like.

It's the sheer outrageousness of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection I want to explore in this book, and the way that life challenged and eventually undermined the social and political realities of his day. Given popular hagiography, Jesus often lives in the modern imagination as a projection of one sort or another—wandering fundamentalist moralist, personal evangelical super-pal, wild-eyed eschatological sidewalk preacher, neoliberal hippie apologist, or some such. What those who study him often fail to do is take a step back to consider just how breathtakingly weird he must have appeared to those who came in contact with him. If there had been an ancient Near Eastern guidebook on how to change the world, Jesus would have appeared in it as a negative case study, a cautionary tale.

Unfortunately, those who would follow him have too often learned the wrong lessons from his life and ministry. Looking at his example as a template for how to be successful in spiritual or ecclesiastical "business" without really trying leads people to the mistaken assumption that trying to be successful was something Jesus had a stake in.

Everything about the narrative of how Jesus the political subversive changed the world seems wildly implausible. But I will argue that it is just this implausibility that should give those who wish to follow him hope. The way success is popularly conceived, changing the world seems like an enterprise beyond the grasp of most of us—who spend

the better part of our lives punching a time clock, or trying to keep our kids safe and our parents happy, or doing laundry and cleaning up dog poop before the neighbors come over for the 4th of July cookout that got ruined last year because Kevin, the guy from the end of the street, thought combining bourbon consumption and firecracker lighting was a good idea.

For most folks, the myth of success in which we've enshrined Jesus is so far out of reach that it makes us feel like hopeless halfwits nobody ever spent tenth grade dreaming about becoming. The question to us is: How do we become *those* people—the people we dreamed about becoming in tenth grade, the people we aspire to be, people who want more than anything else to live like Jesus, the one who stood against the powers of oppression and violence, bringing healing and welcome?

Stanley Milgram, the Shock Box, and the Need for People to Say “No”

“Tyrannies are perpetuated by diffident [people] who do not possess the courage to act out their beliefs.”

~Stanley Milgram²

At this point in our history, the church can't afford the luxury of our personal feelings of inadequacy. The rights of too many vulnerable groups of people are under attack. Let's not be coy: The current presidential administration in the United States—and those who enable it—has threatened the very social fabric and economic safety nets that we've taken for granted would protect undocumented immigrants, people of color, women, refugees, the disabled, the poor, Muslims, those without healthcare, and LGBTQ people. And that threat must be met by followers of Jesus who, like Jesus himself, refuse to accept that the hegemonic powers that keep people under the boot of oppression are the same powers that seem immune to the resistance of Easter.

In the wake of World War II and the emerging revelations about the horror of the Holocaust, people were appalled to think that Germany, a paragon of Western civilization, could produce the kind of people who stood by without raising even the slightest objection while their Jewish friends and associates were carted off to the death camps.

Stanley Milgram, a Yale psychology professor, was fascinated by the moral dilemma raised by otherwise good people who did nothing as the

² Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, rev. ed. (1974; New York: HarperPerennial, 2004), 10.

Jews were rounded up.³ Specifically, he wanted to answer the question: Did the people who worked with Adolph Eichmann in exterminating the Jews share his moral perspective?

That is to say, did the people who were complicit, the people *not* in charge during the Holocaust remain silent (at best) or actively participate (at worst) because they believed they were doing the *right* thing? And if not, why didn't they speak out? So in 1961, Milgram set up an experiment to test the strength of the average person's moral fiber when confronted with evil.

In this experiment, Milgram explained to pairs of "volunteers" that they were doing an experiment testing memory. Unbeknownst to the true volunteers, each each of them was paired with an *actor*. In other words, not all the "volunteers" were volunteers—half of them were paid actors. The real volunteer was placed in one room, able to communicate with the actor in another room, but they couldn't see each other.

The volunteers were positioned in the role of teacher, leading a word game with cards. Every time the learner (the actor in the other room) gave an incorrect answer, the volunteer was supposed to press a button delivering an electric shock. Though the button didn't actually deliver a shock, the volunteer believed pain was being inflicted. In fact, after each wrong answer, the volunteer was told the voltage was increased by 15 volts—all the way up to 450 volts—which the volunteer was told was life threatening.

The experiment began with the *volunteer* receiving a small, 15-volt shock to let them know what it felt like, leading the volunteer to believe the fiction. Moreover, in many cases the volunteers were told up front that the person to whom they were delivering the shock had a heart condition.

After a number of shocks, the unseen actor in the other room would start screaming and pounding on the wall—begging the volunteer to stop administering the shocks. The volunteers began to get uncomfortable, but were told they weren't doing any lasting damage—and that they wouldn't be held responsible. They were also told that they had to continue the experiment to completion, that they "had no choice."

After a number of times pounding on the wall, the noise from the next room would cease altogether. The volunteers were told to take silence as a wrong answer, and to continue administering the

3 In what follows, I am summarizing Milgram's book.

shock—up to the maximum, 450 volts (which was marked XXX on the voltage dial).

Prior to the experiment, Milgram polled several psychology grad students about their expectations that the volunteers would administer the maximum, 450-volt shock. The grad students predicted that only 3 out of 100 volunteers would administer the maximum shock. Milgram also polled his colleagues, who likewise predicted that very few people would be willing to inflict the maximum amount of pain.

As it turned out, however, 65 percent of the volunteers (26 out of 40) went all the way up to 450 volts—even after wondering out loud, many of them, whether they had killed the person in the next room. Interestingly, over the last fifty years Milgram’s test has been replicated numerous times in numerous places— with some modifications to the test due to ethical considerations—with results remaining consistent.⁴ The test suggests that almost 2/3 of people will not speak up against authority, even if they believe that, by their silence, innocent people will be harmed.⁵

Upon reflection, Milgram concluded, “[W]hen you think of the long and gloomy history of [humanity], you will find more hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion.”⁶ Indeed, he argued that the most fundamental lesson of the experiment is that “ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process.”⁷

That’s pretty scary, to find that there are so many people who feel powerless in the face of authority. What’s perhaps even more depressing is the realization that so many people who’ve heard about the experiment are certain that they would be among the 35 percent who said “no.” Indeed, “Upon learning about Milgram’s experiments, a vast majority of people claim that ‘I would never behave in such a manner.’”⁸

So the bad news is that 65 percent of the people failed to resist, even when they could reasonably believe that they were causing great

4 See, for instance, <http://www.spsp.org/news-center/press-releases/milgram-poland-obey>, <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/03/milgram.aspx>

5 The experiment is contested as unethical and insufficiently rigorous. Can we extrapolate from a Yale experiment, the psychological depths of the Holocaust? At the very least, the Milgram experiment is a glimpse at a distasteful reality we’d rather ignore: most people are willing to use deference to an authority figure as a sufficient moral shield. The experiment is also illustrative of what Hannah Arendt called “the banality of evil” in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

6 Milgram, 2.

7 Ibid.

8 See <http://www.spsp.org/news-center/press-releases/milgram-poland-obey>

harm, or even death, to an innocent stranger. But the good news is that 35 percent of the people found the courage to resist authority when obedience might harm the innocent. Thirty-five percent looked at the emperor and proclaimed him to be naked.

Assuming that having people able to withstand the pressure to obey unjust and coercive authority is a good thing, we have to ask the question about how such people are formed. What makes them different from the majority of people who are willing to do things most of them would have rejected as immoral before the experiment? Are they individually courageous, or are they products of a community that helped to shape their capacity for refusing to bow to the people with clipboards and lab coats—or to the folks who carry guns and badges, or who sit in the halls of power?

How do we create members of the 35 percent who are equipped for such a time as this? How do we fashion a courageous people for our current circumstances, when having the ability to stand up to the encroachment of authoritarian impulses seems increasingly useful, and even necessary? How do we develop people who, when the time comes, will resist? Or, perhaps more precisely, how do communities of faith nurture a kind of discipleship that, following the example of Jesus, makes saying “no” to the powerful seem unremarkable.

I imagine the pained look on some faces as they read this and think, “Listen, Chicken Little, things aren’t that bad. Aren’t you being kind of an alarmist? We’re not in any real danger of having to live under a totalitarian regime. You sound like a conspiracy nut, one of those people on late night AM radio.”

Point taken. But let me suggest a couple of things. First, preparing a house to withstand a hurricane is much better done *before* the winds get too gusty. If we wait to prepare until really awful things happen, it may already be too late. I’m not saying anything like the horrific evil of the Holocaust *will* happen, but, given human nature, if it does, 65 percent of people who think of themselves as upstanding citizens will be swept up, unprepared, and, therefore, incapable of saying “no.”⁹

Second, I’m a Christian, and for that reason believe that equipping people to embody the reign of God’s peace and justice is never alarmist. There’s already plenty of cruelty and oppression in the world to keep us occupied, whether or not the black boots ever gosestep to our front porch. In other words, fostering a community capable of speaking truth

9 I’m not one of those guys with a well-fortified bunker in the basement, stocked with 18 months of MREs and a small lake-worth of distilled water to hold out against the coming hordes. But if the zombies ever *do* come, I guess maybe I’ll wish I was. On the other hand, who really wants to be *that* guy?

to power, of resisting policies that always seem to disadvantage the most vulnerable, of living faithfully in a sometimes hostile environment is what followers of Jesus should be preparing for anyway.

So a little something for everybody.

How do we start the process of preparing people to become part of the 35 percent?

Well, as I say, I'm a Christian—so, from my perspective, the logical place to begin is with Jesus.

How I See This Book Shaping Up

In the first chapter, I take up the issue of Jesus' poor judgment in picking a team. Taking into consideration who he chose as his inner circle, I feel safe in saying that he didn't set his sights very high. Jesus teamed up with people not only of questionable ability, but in some cases of questionable character. He made quite a hash of the recruiting process—at least by just about every standard organizational gurus might tell him to employ. Nevertheless, this underwhelming band of inveterate point-missers outperform even the most optimistic of forecasters, laying the groundwork for an enduring religious, social, and political revolution—which, despite the hardship involved, many people are yearning to participate in.

In the second chapter, I explore the unlikely nature of the people to whom Jesus ministered. Once again, Jesus demonstrates his cluelessness by insisting on serving the wrong clientele. Obviously, the opinion-makers find his total lack of discretion unseemly. What's noteworthy, however, is that Jesus is unrepentant—which is to say, not only does he refuse to feel bad about hanging out with tax collectors and prostitutes, he refuses to stop, even though the people in charge apply pressure to get him to do just that. Jesus' example raises an important question for those who would follow him: Where are his followers widening the circle of embrace regardless of who approves? Answering this question opens us up to Jesus' own understanding of his priestly/pastoral duty, and how his ministrations to those on the margins fuel his role as prophet.

Though Jesus showed a deplorable lack of discretion in choosing his friends, he demonstrated even poorer judgment in choosing his enemies. Chapter 3 confronts the problems Jesus buys himself by angering the wrong people—which is to say, the powerful and politically connected—as well as the reasons for alienating those people. Jesus' role as prophet lays the groundwork for a community of prophets, which receives its vocation on Pentecost, with the coming

of the Holy Spirit. I also spend time analyzing Jesus' tactics in dealing with authority—that is, polemical sarcasm—recalling that this is often the posture of the Hebrew prophets who preceded him. Understanding the role of the prophet to give voice to the poor and the powerless raises the question to those who would be his followers about who it is they're making nervous today.

Moreover, when Jesus finally does manage to establish a circle of the faithful, he asks that his followers act in ways unlikely to be embraced by most people. He makes stringent ethical demands of those who choose to sign onto this new venture. In fact, though Jesus is often seen as a more spiritual response to the Gospel's gospel's characterization of the religion of the temple authorities, his demands for virtue regularly outstrip theirs. Chapter 4 focuses on the outrageous nature of what Jesus expected of his followers, and why asking difficult things of those who want to be like Jesus—counterintuitive as it may seem—is precisely what his followers should be doing.

But it's not only that his ethical teachings strain credulity, it's the *manner* in which those teachings are presented—which all but ensured that, even among those who wanted to—Jesus was unlikely to be understood. Chapter 5 looks at the parables as an improbable teaching tool. Given that the parables Jesus told left even his most ardent supporters bewildered, one has to wonder about the impulse in popular Christianity for sticking to easy things, communicated in as inoffensive a way as possible. I will argue that it is the subversive nature of the parables Jesus told that prompted his enemies to understand him as a political threat. For Jesus to use “the kingdom of God” as a touchstone in many of his parables, for example, is already to have mixed politics and religion in ways that led to his death as a political revolutionary.

At least part of the dynamic at play in the world Jesus occupied centered on the hope of a messiah who would deliver God's children from yet another oppressor. Messianic expectations attached themselves to Jesus, who seemed to the people of Galilee like the kind of candidate necessary to build a revolution around—a revolution that would throw off the oppressive Roman regime. Chapter 6 discusses the concept of the messiah in Jesus' time, which was understood to be military and political, rather than spiritual. In his execution at the hands of the state, Jesus failed to deliver on those expectations, and in the process became an unlikely messiah. Those who want to follow Jesus, therefore, must learn to redefine what success looks like, while standing in the humiliating shade of the cross. Then, if they are to be true to him, they have to come to terms with the humiliating political death Jesus suffered, and why it cemented the nature of his life as a political subversive.

Chapter 7 considers the resurrection as the surprising and unlikely ending of Jesus' story. The resurrection is the ultimate political act—taking a political execution, and annulling it. Easter acts as God's judgment on a political system that murdered Jesus, a variation of which continues to abuse those who can't defend themselves. Not only was Jesus' life and death political, but his resurrection was a political act—God's endorsement of a new kingdom that would hold sway over all other kingdoms.

Finally, chapter 8 explores what it might look like to cultivate communities of resistance capable of saying “no” in the face of oppression and violence. What are some practical things, informed by Jesus' example, people can do to prepare themselves and their communities to embody the world God desires in God's new reign? How can we think about the relationship between the work of mercy and the work of justice? How can people who engage in that work in Jesus' name begin to partner with organizations doing the same work? How do we begin to understand the dynamics of social justice work, and then to bridge the divides that stand in the way of that work? These are questions I'll explore in this chapter.

My argument in this book is that the unlikeliness of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is good news to all of us mouth-breathers, afraid that helping to make a dent in the world is beyond us. If Jesus is a lousy messiah, an unlikely revolutionary, there's hope for us too—hope that we will take our place at the center of the resistance to the soul-crushing, death-dealing politics of power that makes the well-off even more well-off and keeps those at the end of the line perpetually bringing up the rear—hope that God can change the world, as unlikely as it seems, through us.

The Worst Recruiter in History

Finding Out You Have It within You to Be a Jerk

If you were ever a middle schooler, you probably had one of two experiences of gym class: either you were among the kids who got picked first for dodge ball, or you felt like you were among the last. Even though a middle exists, in the perception of most middle schoolers, there are only two real positions on the pre-pubescent spectrum of athletic prowess—first and last. Most kids, I suspect, harbor a deep desire not to be chosen last.¹

I grew up with the unflattering distinction of being a “pigeon-toed mouth-breather.” I was a pretty good athlete, so I didn’t worry overmuch about being chosen last. But I was goofy enough in other ways. I was painfully shy. I lived in fear that someone would notice how not-together I was, and draw it to everyone’s attention. It came as something of a surprise to me in seventh grade, for instance, that I had given up on bell bottoms and puca beads much later in the fashion cycle than my peers deemed sartorially appropriate. When someone raised the issue of my unfashionable attachment to hippie culture, I almost vomited. In fact, if I see a picture (one of which my sister dutifully posts every year or so on Facebook—and, since I’m the executor of our parents’ will, that is going to cost her dearly when the time comes) of myself from that time period, my face still flushes.

Humanity’s drive not to get picked last is a powerful one. That drive motivates us to compensate for our insecurities by valuing the kinds of accomplishments we believe the people we respect also value: being rich, good looking, smart, successful, witty—the kinds of things you hope are on full display for everyone when you go back to your

1 This claim isn’t based on any psychological study of the aspirational goals of early teenagers; it is more an observation that being a teenager is (almost by definition) about spending a great deal of effort engineering ways not to stand out for anything. Part of what it means to grow up, I would argue, comes in the dawning awareness that everyone else is also preoccupied with not looking like a huge and public idiot, and so are not especially concerned with your ineptitude.

high school reunion. We want to be the first ones picked when the bigwigs are choosing up sides for the game of life.

I remember a kid in my sixth grade class. His name was Russell. Russell didn't appear to have a lot going for him—at least according to the standards applied by other sixth graders. For one thing, he was extremely needy. I use the adverb “extremely” after much consideration. Given that almost every sixth grader is “constitutionally” needy, Russell distinguished himself by the yawning chasm of his insecurities. He wanted so desperately to be liked, which is exactly the kind of egregious weakness that other insecure kids live to exploit in an attempt to deflect attention from themselves. Like the sick gazelle the rest of the herd has decided is the one they're willing to sacrifice to the lions to save their own skins, Russell was the object of torment...precisely to the extent that he wanted so badly not to be.

For whatever reason, Russell had singled me out as his road to acceptance. He always seemed to be underfoot, like a four-month-old puppy who's already chewed up everything in her reach, and has now decided that your hand...and jeans, and ears, and iPhone are next on the menu. He longed for my validation so badly, which had the effect of making me feel trapped. I wasn't then, nor am I now, someone who functions well in the face of that kind of insatiable desperation.

My aversion to Russell had as much to do with my own insecurities as anything else. I was (and perhaps still am) a horrible human being—a knowledge I have regularly entertained at 3:00 in the morning when I wrestle with my own innumerable inadequacies. Nevertheless, and for whatever reason, Russell was like a piece of packing tape that, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get off of me. Seized with panic that everyone would assume I'd invited this kind of attention, I decided that I needed to do something dramatic to extricate myself from this dilemma, to put some distance between the sick gazelle and me.

One day at recess we were picking teams for kickball. It just so happens that I was one of the captains doing the choosing that particular day. Russell, as was his custom, sidled up to me and said, “Pick me! Pick me! Please!”

“Get back over there, Russell.” I tried to sound commanding, so that everyone else could see I hadn't invited this kind of attention.

“Come on, Derek! Pick me!”

I couldn't budge him. I pushed him away, but he kept coming back. I could sense all eyes on me. My face hot with embarrassment, I said, “Russell, if you don't get off me, I'm going to punch you right in the mouth.” No reaction.

What I did next was the kind of thing that, when I'm tossing and turning in the wee hours of the morning, I still feel shame about. It was the kind of thing that strips one bare of the pretense of having risen above the uncultured herd, of being the hero of one's own narrative.

The look on his face is burned onto the back of my retinas. The betrayal and humiliation he obviously felt lives on as one of those damning pieces of evidence offered by the prosecutor in the trial of my character. I hit a kid who, though annoying as hell, was just a kid trying not to be left out. And as another kid who was also afraid of being left out, to commit this horrible act haunts me—as if William Golding was taking field notes for *Lord of the Flies*, and he dreamed up Jack, the heartless thug, after seeing me punch Russell in the mouth.

After recess, I was called down to the principal's office, where Russell was sitting, his eyes rimmed red from crying, with an ice pack on his jaw. Russell was a kid who needed someone to show him a little compassion, yet it was clear to me watching him hold that ice pack against his face that I valued my own reputation so much I was willing to commit violence to protect it. That thought still shames me.

But the other thing my idiot behavior toward Russell confirms to me is that, given the opportunity, human beings would much rather surround themselves with winners. We gravitate toward the strong, the beautiful, and the accomplished. I'm not a psychotherapist, so I won't pretend to know the psychology of it, but I think I'm on pretty safe ground here. We like winners.²

Given the human propensity for preferring to surround ourselves with winners, while assiduously avoiding losers, Jesus is something of an odd duck, at least when it comes to organizational philosophy. Jesus, if you remember, surrounded himself with some fairly "low rent" pals—fishermen, a tax collector, and the odd insurgent freedom fighter (terrorist, if you happen to be reading the Gospels as an imperialist with a Roman rooting interest).

And if we want to step outside the inner circle for a moment, we also have to come to terms with the fact that Jesus had some inappropriate relationships with women. (No, not like that. I mean: he *taught* them, which was considered a fairly significant cultural no-no.) Jesus seemed to fail to understand the implications of his choice of companions. I'm not sure how else to say it, but Jesus had a nasty habit of hanging

² Yes, we like underdogs too. Fine. I get that. But I would argue that we often root for underdogs because we want them to be winners, not because we want them to remain at the back of the pack. Being a Chicago Cubs fan, I'm something of an expert on this subject.

out with the people typically picked last when choosing up sides. He probably would have picked Russell first.

The Disciples: Going about It All Wrong

Not only did Jesus seem to waste his draft picks on the unfortunate and underwhelming, he employed a strategy for disciple-making guaranteed to befuddle everyone in his world. Having disciples wouldn't have raised any eyebrows, but the way he went about it defied conventional wisdom.

Craig Keener sets down a compelling case that even the way Jesus *called* his disciples would have caused consternation among the Brahmins of Greco-Roman culture.³ According to Keener, it was practiced custom that *disciples* would have sought out the *teacher* and asked to sit at his feet. For *Jesus* to seek out *disciples* would have made him appear insecure, and insecurity was exactly the opposite of the authority a teacher/rabbi wanted to project. To solicit disciples would have reordered fairly strict hierarchical roles in an honor/shame-based culture, making Jesus appear to be the weaker one in the relationship. Setting himself up as weak by the way he approached potential disciples would have exactly the opposite effect that normal recruitment would have had. That is to say, by going after disciples the way he did, he ran the risk of running off the best students. Why would the best and the brightest hitch their wagon to the star of a teacher who appeared to need them more than they needed him? Such a recruitment strategy would have been self-defeating, leaving only the most substandard prospects to choose from.

Moreover, Jesus avoided appealing to rabbis educated in the traditional way, since such disciples—given Jesus' unconventional teachings—would have had to unlearn too much.⁴ As it was, his calling of disciples from among artisans gave Jesus an opening. Calling disciples from this class of people allowed Jesus to make the case that the skills they'd already developed in practicing their vocations could be put to use in this new reign he was about to announce. In other words, Jesus didn't waste time head-hunting among the "captains of the football team," who most likely would have rejected his call as coming from an unserious teacher anyway. And even if they had responded positively to Jesus' appeal, he might have faced resistance from people who already would have felt confident in their own burgeoning theological interpretation. Instead, he called a bunch of guys off the docks down

3 Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 150.

4 *Ibid.*, 151.

by the harbor and convinced them that, as good as they were with a net when it came to catching fish, he could teach them how to fish for *people*.

But though fishing wasn't a path to riches, it was a fairly stable living. You could buy a shotgun house, have a backyard, and take the family to Disney World every couple of years. Securing this kind of stable, if modest, income would have been difficult to walk away from. Yet that was precisely what Jesus asked of his disciples. As Keener points out, Jesus' call to discipleship was a call to downward mobility.⁵ You can imagine the pitch: "Hey y'all, I've got a great proposition for you. Take everything you and your family have worked for, perhaps over several generations, and bet it on a pair of threes. I know a pair of threes doesn't seem like a good bet, but I'm telling you, you won't be sorry."

What's especially amazing about Jesus' sales job is that, despite how terrible it was, it worked. Jesus' disciples walked away from their settled existences and threw in with an itinerant rabbi who promised only that their lives as his followers would be meaningful and interesting. And if they didn't immediately realize the potential danger their new vocations would bring them, I suspect they figured it out soon enough.

Further complicating matters, Keener goes on to argue, is the fact that Jesus' call challenged the settled social norms around the priority of family relationships.⁶ When Jesus calls James and John, they leave their old man on the boat with his mouth hanging open. You can imagine the subsequent conversation:

"Hey! Where are y'all going?"

"No idea."

"When will y'all get back?"

"Don't know."

"Okay. So who are you going with?"

"Never met him before."

"What about the business? I've got a boat payment coming up!"

"Sorry, Pops."

Not only did Jesus go out searching for disciples who knew next to nothing about theology and ask them to forfeit their economic stability, he asked them to walk away from their families. In a culture that assumed familial relationships as fundamental, Jesus' appeal

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, 153.

couldn't help but appear scandalous. He made the prospect of joining him about as unappealing as he possibly could have.

But that's the hell of it; Jesus not only fails to give a compelling reason to follow him, he doesn't give any reason at all—just, “Follow me.” I imagine most people, if they ever give it much thought, find Jesus' lack of salesmanship confounding. Even Luke appears to have felt the need to explain why it was that the first disciples dropped what they were doing and followed on such a thin pretext. Whereas Mark and Matthew recount the calling of Simon Peter and Andrew without any detail about their motivation for following, Luke sees the narrative problem that such an abrupt response to the calling poses for his readers.

Luke, as a way of demonstrating why it might have seemed more reasonable to follow Jesus, tells a story about Jesus first doing a miracle, in which he tells Simon to drop his nets over the side. Simon responds by saying, quite reasonably, “Well, as it turns out, we've already been fishing this spot all night long, and have come up empty-handed—but, you know, whatever.” Simon lowers his nets, and they come back up so full of fish that the boat starts sinking.

You put a miracle story in front of the calling, and the whole “leaving-everything-behind” thing starts to make a little bit more sense—which is why I prefer Mark's and Matthew's accounts. Luke seems intuitively to know that his readers might have a difficult time swallowing the call narrative of the main disciples, given nothing more concrete than, “Hey, y'all! This way.” So, he weaves in a story that explains why the disciples responded to Jesus' call: because of a *miracle*. But what do we do with the earlier version that doesn't bother to try to set down any clues about their decision to follow?

As I have indicated, I like the spare treatment of Jesus' call to discipleship, but not just because I'm lazy and don't like to read any more than I have to. Instead, the reason I prefer those accounts is that they relieve all responsibility on the part of the disciples for having somehow gotten faith, or theology, or just general post-adolescent behavior figured out before Jesus extended the call to them. The Lukan account gets it more nearly like we would typically expect: (1) Compelling motivating factor (i.e., a miracle, or a spiritual experience of the Divine, or just a really emotional talk around the fire at church camp); (2) Call (“Follow me”); (3) Positive response (“Um, okay”).

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously pointed out in *The Cost of Discipleship*, we tend to reckon that faith precedes following.⁷ That

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 50.

is to say, it's common to assume that people first need to have a sufficient amount of faith, and then they begin to follow. Of course, one problem raised by such a conception is the question: "What counts as 'a sufficient amount of faith'?" In other words, how do you know you've reached the necessary RPMs to get the motor of following Jesus underway?"

The answer, of course, is that there is no minimum daily requirement of faith everyone can point to.⁸ Consequently, people expecting such a threshold can use its absence as an excuse to stay on the boat and keep fishing.

But, as Bonhoeffer suggests, Mark's and Matthew's accounts, in which there's nothing we can point to that would explain the fishermen's immediate and positive response to Jesus' call, force us to conclude that faith emerges only after the decision to follow. Faith, in these accounts, is something you work your way into; it's not something you start with, which then elicits commitment.

When I was a kid, my mom paid a neighbor to give us swimming lessons in her backyard pool. Her son was a Special Olympics champion swimmer, so she knew what she was doing. When my brother and I got to Mrs. Palmer's house, I was prepared for her to try to explain the technique of swimming, and then have us try it out in the pool. But the first thing she said was, "Okay, boys, hop in the pool, and start swimming."

I said, "But we don't know how to swim. That's why we're taking lessons."

She responded, "I can't teach you how to swim until you start swimming." It sounded like a Buddhist Koan.

"Start swimming however you know how," she said. "And I'll take what you know already, and use it to make swimmers out of you."

It makes sense to me now. Swimming is such an odd thing that trying to explain it, to walk the uninitiated through the kinesthetic movements without requiring them first to get in the water, will never make sense. You learn to swim only after giving up on the idea that you must first understand swimming before you ever take a step into the water.

⁸ I know I just mixed my metaphors. And acknowledging that I know I mixed my metaphors should give me a pass—like saying, "No disrespect, but..." apparently means you can say anything you want. I'm praying, for a lot of reasons, that a little self-awareness covers a multitude of sins.

What the calling of the disciples teaches us is that faith is something that develops only after you make the seemingly irrational commitment to follow.⁹

To recap Jesus' winning vocational pitch:

1. Jesus, in an unadvisable breach of pedagogical protocol, went after disciples, instead of allowing them to come to him. This reversal of norms would have had the effect of turning off the best prospects, forcing them to conclude that Jesus wasn't good enough to let the pupils come to him.
2. Whether as a consequence of point number one, or because he intended to do it this way, Jesus appealed to the least likely candidates for discipleship—not those who everybody would have agreed ought to fill out the Opening Day roster (because he'd have to undo all their formal education), but a bunch of backwater tradesmen who made everything they touched smell like fish.
3. Jesus asked them to sacrifice their economic stability and embrace downward economic mobility.
4. A precondition of following Jesus was turning their backs on their families, which everybody at the time had been raised to believe was the worst kind of betrayal.
5. And if all that weren't enough, Jesus then failed to give his potential recruits any good reasons about why turning their back on prudence and decorum would be a good thing. He said, "Come," and they came.

Why Is This Good News?

Given Jesus' deplorable lack of cultural self-awareness, an outsider might be forgiven for wondering how it is that he made any impact at all. Knowing how the world works, you can't help but be shocked by Jesus' strategic missteps and obvious lack of discretion.

If anyone had bothered to ask me how to set up a winning team to change the world, I would have said that you need to start with the best: Nobel Prize winners; Silicon Valley wizards; captains of finance and industry; some high-priced attorneys; a couple of polling geniuses.

If you want to set yourself up for success, then you'd better start stocking the pond with the best fish.

⁹ I'm not making the case that faith is somehow beyond the bounds of rationality, just that such rationality most often proceeds from the move to follow; it's presence is not necessarily an antecedent.

Get the smartest people you know, put them in a room together, and tell them they can't come out until they've got a PowerPoint and a jingle. Tell them that there will be grading (over-achievers love grades) and stock options (for the financially savvy) and a chance to go down in history. Boom!

I'm no organizational guru, but that seems like a winning combination to me. Give yourself the greatest chance of success by surrounding yourself with the people who have the potential for realizing the greatest success—then get out of their way.

But Jesus, as we've pointed out, hadn't been reading enough books on corporate leadership. In his estimation, all he needed were a few people willing to drop their nets, walk away from everything they'd been taught to value, and follow. In the abstract, Jesus' whole strategy can't help but come across to us as delusional (at best) or self-defeating (at worst).

Additionally, Jesus ignored good recruitment strategy by failing to give the potential followers a clear reason to sign up. *And* not only did he fail to give them proper motivation for dropping their nets and following, he actively de-incentivized it. He asked his disciples to walk away from security and family and head out into the unknown with a guy they'd only just met.

It makes very little sense—at least in the way *we've* been taught to make sense of the world: get your ducks in row, have a sound business plan, engage people with experience and demonstrated expertise, secure financing, and lay out a targeted marketing strategy that will ensure what you're selling is something people are willing to buy.

Jesus does *none* of that. In fact, he appears to size up conventional wisdom, nod his head, and then walk right past it with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face. His whole way of going about his work strikes us as baffling.

There endeth the lesson. If you were expecting something more profound out of me on this, you're bound to be disappointed.¹⁰

So what's the moral of this story?

As near as I can tell, Jesus didn't set out to formulate new principles to help aspiring young executives cut through the politics of business, or science, or academia, or ecclesiastical management. Indeed, if what you're most interested in is mining the Gospels for a few edifying lessons you can whip out at the next board meeting, Jesus is going to be a huge disappointment.

10 And don't act all superior, either. You're not the first person I've disappointed.

And this is a problem for those whom Jesus calls today. Modern followers of Jesus have often taken to reading literature on management theory, and then trying to baptize it in a shallow theology of organizational success: Enlist someone famous as a frontman/woman—or, failing that, at least get the most attractive people you can find. Invest big in glossy design. Seek candidates who can best further your cause. Avoid over-asking in the initial pitch. And above all, make certain to emphasize that this journey will cost them nothing they care about.

Let me be quick to add that, if you're doing any of those things, that's fine, I guess. Wait, let me rethink that: maybe it's *not* fine. Because, what I'm criticizing here has to do with a mindset that views a strategy of shallowness as the way forward—just because it's easily marketed. I'm calling into question the assumption that following Jesus is pretty much like everything else in life, just with more crosses on the mugs of Elysian Dragonstooth Stout. So, strike that. If selling Jesus on the cheap is what you're doing, it's not fine. Not even close. Ask Bonhoeffer. So, just stop.

Turns out, from the very beginning Jesus flipped conventional wisdom on its head: he sought to recruit the wrong people, and he did it in the worst way. This is extraordinarily good news for those who've labored throughout their lives under the impression that everything turns on being picked first.

We have the opportunity, by attending to the way Jesus called disciples, to reorient ourselves to what God values in this new reign Jesus announced. Instead of holding ourselves to impossible standards of competency, Jesus shows us that God doesn't need much in the way of raw material to accomplish God's purposes. And crucially, Jesus' *modus operandi* gives us both reassurances and warnings: you don't have to have it all together before you take up with Jesus, but you'd better be aware that the whole enterprise is pretty risky. The irony of this statement is that even the warnings are good news.

But why?

Obviously, it's good news that you don't have to have a Ph.D. in theology, don't have to have apprenticed to Dorothy Day or Oscar Romero, to be useful to God. That feels self-evidently good. But the warning about what it will cost, though it can frighten some away, also operates as a signal to those who are looking for something meaningful to give their lives to/for. People aren't necessarily scared off by suffering and sacrifice, but by suffering and sacrifice without meaning. Jesus offers a way of being in the world that costs his followers; but, that

cost is worth it when set within a narrative, the goal of which is the remaking of the world as God envisions it. That's the story we must tell.

When I teach Introduction to the Study of Religion, I always use a particular example when it comes time to talk about *theodicy*—or, the stories we tell ourselves about where God is in the face of evil. I tell my students that locating ourselves within a narrative that makes sense of suffering offers meaning and gives us the strength to endure, since it allows us to avoid the prospect of a meaningless and chaotic world, which is what frightens us most. So, I walk my students through the following story.

Imagine you woke up in a hospital bed, confused about why you were there. Suddenly, your nose started to itch, but when you went to scratch it, you noticed that your hand was bandaged. So, you decided to use your other hand, but soon noticed that it was also bandaged.

"What's happened to me?" you think. This causes you to do a silent health inventory on your whole body. But before you get very far, you realize that as you go to wiggle your toes you can't feel them. In fact you can't feel anything below your knees. You go to sit up, and find that, below your knees, your feet and legs are missing.

At this point, I ask my students, "How do you feel?"

The answer comes back, which is always some form of "terrified" or "panicked."

"Of course," I say. "How could you not feel terror? As you start to process this new terrifying information about yourself, you start thinking about the mini-marathon you're supposed to run next week. And immediately, you're reminded that you told your parents you'd help spread mulch over the weekend. And what about your job? How are going to manage the physical part of that now? Your future? What now? The weight of it hits you."

Then I ask my students, "Now what are you feeling?"

"Depression." "Despair." "Defeat."

I say, "That's entirely understandable too, given the horror you've just woken up to, and what that means to the future you'd envisioned."

Then, I continue the story.

But just as you're certain that your life is over, the doctor walks in. Having no idea about what's going on, you've got a thousand questions running through your mind. The first one, of course, is: "What happened?"

The doctors says, "Well, I have some bad news. You were in an accident on the highway. Your car caught fire, and you sustained devastating burns. The ones on your leg were bad enough that we had to amputate both legs below the knee."

This news is even worse than you feared. The doctor keeps going. "The thing of it is, though, you initially escaped the accident without a scratch. You sustained your injuries when you saw that your mother was trapped in the front seat, as the car burst into flames. From all we can gather from witness statements, you went back to get your mother out. In the process, of rescuing her, though, your hand apparently got trapped in between the passenger seat and the console, and your clothes caught fire. The fire fighters ultimately extricated you, but not before the fire had done this damage."

I tell my students, "As the doctor talks, you realize you remember none of this."

The doctor continues: "The good news is, though, you were able to get your mother out. She sustained only minor injuries. The fact remains, you saved your mother's life. Without your sacrifice she would have died. You're a hero."

With all of this running through their minds, I ask my students, "Now, how do you feel?"

The answers I usually get after the question this time are more varied: "Relieved." "Still terrified, but grateful." "Panicky, but glad my mom's all right."

"Why the change?"

"Well, because my mom's going to be okay."

People can withstand great adversity if they feel it serves some greater purpose. Locating suffering and sacrifice within a narrative that helps make sense of them not only helps people endure chaos and hardship, but often provides the kind of meaning people are desperately seeking to give their lives.

On Jun 12, 1963 Medgar Evers returned home after a meeting with attorneys from the NAACP. He was the first field secretary for the NAACP in Mississippi, working to organize boycotts and protests, as well as to register African Americans to vote. Needless to say, Medgar Evers found himself the target of white hostility among those who sought to retain control of the politics and culture of a state with a bloody history of oppressing black people.

Medgar pulled into his driveway, got out of his car and headed into his house to see his family. He was carrying NAACP t-shirts that read, "Jim Crow has got to Go." After exiting his car, however, he was shot in the back. His wife found him bleeding out on the concrete—a horrific tragedy beheld in living color by his wife and three children.

The story of Medgar Evers and his assassination remains one of the foundational stories of the civil rights movement—a story that prompted not only outrage, but that emboldened the very African American population his assassination was meant to terrorize. His wife, Myrlie Evers (later, Myrlie Evers-Williams) picked up that work, ultimately becoming the chairperson of the board of the NAACP, continuing the struggle for which her husband had died.

In an interview with National Public Radio, Farai Chideya asked Myrlie Evers-Williams how, in the days leading up to the assassination, she had dealt with the fear that he might be hurt or killed.

"I knew, at some point, as he did—and we talked about it—that since he was the point person, he would be eliminated. We just didn't know when or how."

Chideya followed up by asking, "Do you literally mean that you spoke about this—that 'one day I probably will die?' Your husband said that to you?"

"Mm-hmm. But we knew that. We knew that from the day he accepted the job with the NAACP."

Later in the interview, Myrlie Evers-Williams described what the implications of that sacrifice amounted to:

We had three children, which meant that they were going to grow up without a father. How would I explain it to them? How would I handle my tendency toward suicide? I did not want to live without him... And you know, I think people tend to think, "Oh, that person's gone. Sure there's sadness." But they don't think about the impact, the long-term impact that losing someone like that can have on you. My children witnessed their father's death. My children, to this day, still remember that nightmare. And it has affected all of us.¹¹

Even knowing what it might cost him, Medgar Evers dropped his nets and went. But perhaps even more impressively, Myrlie Evers-Williams, knowing the toll it would exact, dropped her nets and walked beside him. I say that her sacrifice was perhaps even more impressive,

11 See <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15405815>

because while the dead are soon done with death, those left behind are never entirely finished with it.

But what gave both of them the strength to walk down the road they were called to walk is the fact that they found themselves within a narrative that gave meaning to the sacrifices they were likely to have to make. They believed the work they were engaging in was a necessary corrective to a world that oppressed them, and would surely do the same to their three children.

Jesus calls his disciples, and they come. As they walk away from their stable lives and the comfort of their families, they know immediately that there are significant costs associated with following Jesus. But they go anyway.

How do we explain the disciples' reaction? I suspect that, however they sensed it, Jesus' disciples somehow understood that they were being called to a life that would offer them the kind of purpose they couldn't find by quietly tending to business, closing up the shop, and going home to a hot cup of clam chowder and a round of Jeopardy before laying down their heads at night.

At the heart of what it means to follow Jesus lies a call to walk toward a goal we can't comprehend before setting out, but one that we trust ultimately has meaning because it is *Jesus* who calls. Furthermore, we must admit that responding to this call could cost us everything we hold dear—perhaps even our lives. The potential consequences of following Jesus, however, are narrated within the context of a story that shows those sacrifices are a necessary cost of following Jesus.

What Do We Do?

The question of how it is we are to model Jesus' upside down view of discipleship will require us to reorient our thinking. Without regard to *what* he taught—which I'll take on in chapters 4 and 5—the kind of people Jesus calls, the way he calls them, and the cost such a call will exact from those who follow are still worth considering. If we accept the challenge of our own discipleship to make disciples, we need to attend to the issue of how we ought to think about extending such a call to people. Perhaps the best way to approach Jesus' methods is in a series of questions. First:

What if people who want to live as Jesus asked could make peace with the fact that, conventional wisdom be damned, Jesus didn't need a team of Homecoming Queens and Kings to make a dent in the world?

Given the increased interest in pursuing social and political change since the 2016 presidential election that is causing tectonic shifts in both foreign and domestic policy, it seems natural to believe that any meaningful resistance to forces that play footsie with racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, anti-refugee views, and transphobia must be massive in scale—especially with respect to personnel. The tendency is toward paralysis, since most people (at least any with even a smattering of sense) feel inadequate when the stakes are so high. People, when the subject turns to the prospect of embodying the new world God has in mind, often believe that such a radical shift in our orientation to ourselves, to one another and our common life, as well as to creation itself will require a theological “Justice League,” peopled with ecclesiastical superheroes.¹²

But the question raised by the story of the unlikely group of disciples Jesus called gives us some perspective on what kind of people God requires to realize God’s purposes. The answer is hopeful: God doesn’t need much in the way of raw material from the human resources department to do the work necessary to change the world. This is good news for all of us “pigeon-toed mouth-breathers,” afraid that we’re too small, too incompetent, too shy, or too ignorant to embark on such an earth-shattering endeavor.

What becomes clear after looking at Jesus’ personnel decisions is that he’s not especially picky, and we who are serious about our responsibility to call people to follow Jesus shouldn’t be picky either. That doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t always be looking for great people to do the work. Instead, it’s a rejection of the excuse that we can’t get started doing anything important because we’re still waiting for the A-team to show up.

Jesus turned the world on its head with a few people willing to drop what they were doing to follow him down whatever dark alley he decided to explore. We should be more concerned about willingness than competence. Let God worry about competence.

Next question:

What if people who spend their lives trying to dream up newer and less detectable ways to sell people on the life of discipleship leave behind the assumption that getting everything right in the recruitment spiel is necessary before God can let loose the spirit of peace and justice on the world?

12 An assumption I will challenge in chapter 8.

Maybe the real problem isn't that we don't have an effective marketing strategy, but that we're not entirely convinced what we're calling people to do has a chance of making a difference.

One advantage evangelicals have in this department is their conviction that people are going to a literal hell where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth...and endless reruns of *Hannah Montana*. Progressive mainliners who can feel their ACLU membership cards start to curl any time they think about hell need to discover some of that evangelistic zeal when it comes to calling people to join us on the adventure of following Jesus—not because we're afraid they'll go to hell, but because the work is difficult, and we need all the help we can get. We have to believe that something important is at stake, that what we're calling people to is a necessary part of unveiling the reign of God's peace and justice.

In our attempt to make certain everybody knows we're not “those kind of Christians,” we mainliners, I think, have unwittingly communicated that we don't think living like Jesus is urgent. Even when we do manage a sense of urgency, we're pretty sure that we'll get the messaging wrong. Therefore, it's best to wait, and see if somebody comes out with a program we can use—one that'll help us not to feel like hayseeds and rubes, and won't ask too much of us.

But Jesus' recruitment strategy puts the lie to the notion that what's most critical is finding a catchy recruitment strategy. Jesus walked up to a bunch of strangers and said, “Um...hey guys. Want to go on an adventure?”

Our modern response to the story is to be somewhat skeptical: “There has to be more to the story than that. People don't just drop everything without being given some reason.”

I'd prefer the motivation that drives the disciples to follow be fleshed out a bit more too. But guess what? At least in Matthew and Mark, the Gospel writers don't seem to think an explanation for why people responded to such an obviously inadequate pitch is necessary. They were convinced that the mere fact of having Jesus call was motivation enough.

Next question:

What if we stop trying to convince people that all that's required of them to head out on this journey with Jesus is having strong feelings in their hearts, and instead told them that what they're being called to is political, and that it may cost them their stability, their family, perhaps even their lives?

When I lived in Appalachia, I was asked to go to a second grade class during Holy Week and talk about what I do. As I thought about what I would say, I kept running into problems. How do you explain being a clergy person in a way that differentiates you from a politician? How do you talk about pastoral care in ways that help them understand you're not a doctor or a nurse? How do you tell them about the things a minister does in a way they could understand?

As I was driving to the elementary school, I still didn't have any idea how I was going to explain what I do. And then it struck me: boiled down to its essence, my job is to tell the truth.

"My job," I said, "is to tell people the truth about how much God loves them and how God expects them to act toward one another. There are other things I have to do, but telling the truth is the main part of my job."

In a world programmed to cling to comfortable lies, telling the truth is perhaps the most pastoral thing we can do. And learning to tell the truth about the costs associated with following Jesus is the first step. When calling people to live as Jesus asked us to live, we have to learn to be honest about the costs. Much of what counts for discipleship is a commitment to decenter the other claims made upon our lives—claims made by our country, our profession, even sometimes our families. As a husband and father of three children, I don't say that lightly, but soft-soaping this one can lead to buyer's remorse when it's later discovered that the costs were greater than we gave people the right to expect.

Jesus calls us to go on an adventure, not a church picnic. And if we're going to follow his example, we should be honest about the fact that the cost of discipleship is steep. As far as I know, the world has never undergone any great change over fried chicken and potato salad.

What's more, people who are looking for something bigger than themselves to give their lives to are rarely wowed into a stupefied acquiescence by hip gurus and white chocolate cinnamon chai lattes. They want to make a difference, and appealing to them on any other terms will prompt them to walk away faster than a gore metal fan from a Taylor Swift arena concert.

So, why not just own it? *Following Jesus is difficult.* But if you find adventure interesting, you've come to the right place. Because, if you thought Jesus showed poor judgment in choosing his inner circle, just wait till you see the people he made a habit of hanging out with.

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