



**“Autonomy, Heteronomy or Theonomy?”**  
**Matthew 4:12-23**  
**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**January 23, 2011**

George Gallup conducted a nationwide survey of college students, asking them to name their one most serious concern. A number of worries surfaced, but without question the number concern was: What am I supposed to do with the rest of my life? As he reported those statistics, Gallup noted that this was not surprising because college is the time for making momentous decisions that will influence the course of your life.

However, he was a bit surprised when he interviewed people in their 30s regarding *their* greatest concerns. He discovered that even though this older group mentioned a wider variety of issues than the college students, number one was still: What am I supposed to do with the rest of my life? Gallup was stunned when he surveyed people in their 40s and 50s, because they responded with the same answer. Then he was floored when he surveyed people in their 60s and 70s. They listed many more concerns than those who were younger, but their number one concern was still: What am I supposed to do with the rest of my life?<sup>1</sup>

Each day of our lives we shape who we are and who we will become. The choices we make and the opportunities we pursue or pass up, continue to form us until the day we die. How mindful are you of the person you are becoming each day?

Some of our decisions have little impact on the course of our lives, others are monumental. Decisions about marriage, children and careers have enormous consequences. Perhaps the most important decision any of us ever make is whether or not to follow Christ.

This morning's passage from the Gospel of Matthew tells of an event that took place as Jesus was launching his ministry. He decided to form a band of followers and called on several individuals to join him. Walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus spotted Simon and Andrew, two fishermen casting their nets into the water. Jesus said, "Follow me and I will show you how to fish for people." Perhaps they were attracted by his unusual offer, perhaps they saw something extraordinary in Jesus or perhaps they were simply tired of smelling like fish! Whatever the reason, they left their nets and followed him.

A short distance down the shore, Jesus eyed James and John sitting in a boat with their father. Jesus extended the same offer. The brothers left their father and followed him. The story seems to suggest that all four men made a quick, on the spot decision. Jesus issued an invitation, the men jumped to their feet and committed to following him.

Maybe it happened that way, but I suspect it was more complicated than that. Like each of us must do, they probably weighed their options before making such a serious commitment.

In whatever manner it happened, their decision to follow Jesus changed everything. It propelled them in a new direction and transformed them into new people. It opened amazing worlds to them and honed their vision of what they were supposed to do with the rest of their lives.

Our decision to follow Christ changes everything. We see the world from a particular viewpoint and we are motivated by certain values.

The great 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian, Paul Tillich, described law in three ways: autonomy, heteronomy and theonomy. Autonomy is when we make our own rules. Heteronomy is when we follow the rules that are imposed on us by others. Theonomy is when we align ourselves with God's vision. Theologian Bruce Epperly says that this creates a unique synergy of divine call and human response.<sup>2</sup>

When we think of following Christ as aligning ourselves with God's vision for the world, we realize that the decision to follow Christ is not a one-time commitment. We are confronted with the decision to follow Christ whenever we face a temptation, whenever we meet someone new, whenever we encounter an injustice, whenever we decide how to spend our money.

Each day – multiple times each day – Christ calls us to follow *his* way rather than some other way. However, it is a constant struggle because we are not always as strong as we wish. Our faith can become fragile when we encounter suffering. Our joy can quickly fade when challenges mount. Our will can turn timid in the face of opposition. Our hope can collapse in times of crisis.

Living in a culture that claims that greed is good, that personal desires trump biblical values and that focusing the spotlight on ourselves will bring happiness, it is tempting to fall for Christianity-light rather than to commit ourselves to the one whose path led to his death.

However, the rich life, the abundant life, comes from following Christ. A rewarding life does not result from the path of least resistance and deep satisfaction does not arise from continuous smooth sailing. People would never climb mountains, go on mission trips or practice the piano for hours on end if avoiding struggle equated to satisfaction. People would not agree to serve on boards, to give away their money or work in a soup kitchen if joy resulted from self-centeredness.

Christ challenges us to step out of a self-focused mindset and to let him be our guide. He counsels us to forgive rather than seek revenge, to serve the needs of others rather than seeking to be served, to be generous in our giving rather than holding tightly to our wealth to love people rather than possessions, to welcome strangers rather than playing it safe, to seek justice for the neglected rather than leaving them to fend for themselves.

Many Christians have only a partial understanding of the life Christ calls them to live. Journalist Anna Louise Strong said, "It was as if I had worked for years on the wrong side of a tapestry, learning accurately all its lines and figures, yet always missing its color and sheen."<sup>3</sup>

The teachings of Christ forge a path to deeper friendships, greater appreciation of beauty and clearer vision. God's wisdom leads to joy, peace and well-being. That is not to say that following Christ is either simple or easy. It can be exceedingly strenuous and demanding, and often requires a heart of courage.

Some seem to believe that if they follow Christ, they will be inoculated from hardships. But Christ does not take away suffering; he gives us the strength to endure it. He does not vanquish our problems; he shows us how to make the best of them. But not everyone is willing to make a strong commitment to Christ. Some will eagerly follow when life is good and blessings are apparent, however when temptations present themselves or problems arise, their commitment collapses and they give up on Christ.

A story is told about a model that Leonardo Da Vinci used for Jesus for his famous painting of the Last Supper. He was an attractive young man with beautiful, clear eyes and a blessedly kind face. Da Vinci had found him among the singers in the Milan cathedral choir.

Da Vinci spent years on the painting and when it was near completion he went into the slums of Milan to look for a fitting model for Judas. In a few hours, he found the perfect candidate. The man had a hardened look; his eyes were clouded and they shifted when he talked.

While the man was posing for Judas, Da Vinci is said to have looked closer at him, hesitated and then asked, "Have we met before?"

There was a long silence and then the man finally said, "I was your model for Jesus... but much has happened in my life since then."<sup>4</sup> When commitment is faint and determination is meager the results can be tragic.

In scooting too quickly to the portion of today's passage that focuses on the response of the disciples to follow Jesus, I have for years overlooked a significance detail in the story. It has to do with where Jesus chose to have his home base. Listen again to Verse 13 and see what emotions it evokes in you. "(Jesus) left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali." What

images are prompted and what emotions are stirred when I say that Jesus chose to be in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali? Not much of anything? Theologian Dean Lueking says that to ancient ears, it was equivalent to saying “Viet Nam, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Zebulun and Naphtali evoked the hellishness of war and the darkness for those who live in its aftermath.”<sup>5</sup>

The territory of Zebulun and Naphtali was the area known in the time of Moses as the Promised Land. However, during the time of Jesus, it was land where Roman troops had killed many Jews and seized control. The Jewish people were living under Roman occupation. They were being ruled by Gentile imperialists.

With that understanding, Verse 16 packs more punch. Verse 16: “the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” Jesus set up camp in a place of darkness, in a place of despair, in order to bring hope. That is precisely what followers of Christ are called to do. Christ calls us to shed light in the dark places of our world.

One of those dark places today is Bethlehem, not too many miles from Zebulun and Naphtali. 50,000 Palestinians live behind a wall, part concrete and part steel, under Israeli military occupation. The Christians in Bethlehem – who are Palestinians – are being pressured and slowly driven out.

However, despite making up only a fraction of the population, the Palestinian Christians are creating signs of hope. They have built a medical clinic, a wellness center and a K-12 school for Muslim and Christian children. This past fall, they opened the first fine arts college for Arabs. It has 200 full-time students and 1,000 part-time students. The Reverend Mitri Raheb, the pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church is a leading force behind these new developments. When asked how he continues to hold up under relentless pressure and continuing darkness, he said simply: “I start a new project.”<sup>6</sup> He responds to the despair with concrete signs of hope, and as a result, in Bethlehem’s seemingly impenetrable darkness there are glimmers of light.

As committed followers of Christ, this is what you and I have signed up to do. In places where people suffer, we are not to whine, wring our hands and wait for others to do something about it. Christ challenges us to pull back the curtains, so that God’s light can pierce the darkness.

## NOTES

1. Thomas Tewell, “What Is That in Your Hand?” April 29, 2001.
2. Bruce Epperly, “Lectionary Commentary,” on the *Process and Faith* website for October 17, 2010.
3. Sarah Ban Breathnach, *Simple Abundance: A Daybook of Comfort and Joy*, (New York: Warner Books, 1995), page: January 18.
4. Michael L. Lindvall, quoting from Mark Link’s book, *Challenge*, in “What We Shall Be,” November 2, 2008.
5. Dean Lueking, “Living By the Word,” in *Christian Century*, January 11, 2011, p.21.
6. Ibid.