



**“Changing Course”**

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Mk. 1:14–20 (NRSV)***

Today’s gospel reading depicts one of the most familiar stories about the life and ministry of Jesus known to Christians, “The call of the Disciples.” Those of us who were raised in the church most likely learned a familiar round associated with this story when we were children. The song is called “Fishers of Men.” The lyrics go like this:

I will make you fishers of men,  
Fishers of men, fishers of men.  
I will make you fishers of men,  
If you follow Me.

If you follow Me,  
If you follow Me,  
I will make you fishers of men,  
If you follow Me.

This children’s song sounds sweet and innocent, doesn’t it?

Whenever I read the story about the call of the disciples, my mind is flooded with memories of singing “Fishers of Men” in church school and children’s choirs, and then later, watching and listening to my sister’s girls learn this song and recite it while snacking on Pepperidge Farm Goldfish in their highchairs and car seats. Now my niece, Susie, is teaching her son, Naaman, to sing this song with his eat Goldfish snacks, which are now available in every color in the rainbow.

It’s a sweet song, and innocent story. Right?

Wrong. My informed study of scripture as an adult has given me a very different view of today’s text than I learned in my childhood. Jesus’ call of the disciples and the dynamics at work in today’s text are anything but sweet and innocent. Jesus’ call to the disciples was a radical invitation to leave everything that they had ever known, and, oh by the way, to do so even though they might get arrested or suffer worse consequences, like John did, for being associated with him.

## II

The Greek term used to describe the disciples' response to Jesus' call was *metanoia*. In modern English, *metanoia* is translated several ways depending on the discipline in which the term is used. Theologically speaking, *metanoia* has to do with a dramatic change of mind and heart.

Some theologians argue that *metanoia* has to do with an about-face or a radical change of course. Others see *metanoia* as no less dramatic, but more gradual, like the metamorphosis we associate with a butterfly. Regardless of the speed or tone associated with it, the Christian understanding of *metanoia* has to do with significant change. It denotes the total transformation of a person. One who has experienced *metanoia* is never the same again.

Unfortunately, because of our aversion to what I tend to think of as “shame-and-blame theology,” many progressive Christians have surrendered the term *metanoia* to the fundamentalists, who use the term synonymously with the need for personal repentance in order to avoid hell, fire, and damnation.

Though I'm not into scaring the hell out of people, I believe (and perhaps you do too) that there comes a time in most of our lives when change is needed. Perhaps even now, as I mention this thought, you recall a time in your life when you knew that it was time for a change, and you took the steps that were necessary for change to unfold. Some examples of the need for radical change in one's personal life follow.

## III

Sometimes we realize the need for a change in our relationship with our spouse or partner. Sometimes the need for that change comes as a kind of sneaking suspicion that things could be better, and sometimes it hits us over the head.

Most couples who raise children, for example, find that it takes so much time and energy to raise little nestlings that when the last one moves out (hopefully for good), they need to spend time investing in their relationship as a couple in order to get reacquainted and figure out who they want to be now, and how they want to be together in the future. Major life changes, such as emptying the nest, may gently signal the need for some relationship reassessment, re-visioning, and recommitment.

In other cases, the need for a change can kind of hit you over the head—literally. I'm sorry to say that the statistics on domestic violence in our nation are deplorable. I have learned from experts in the field of social work that the average adult victim of domestic violence (usually a woman) returns to an abusive relationship 33 times before she is either dead or leaves for good.

There are many reasons that victims stay in abusive relationships. One of the most common reasons is the familiarity of the relationship dynamics. Victims typically don't have a lot of experience in healthier domestic relationships. Most people who end up in abusive relationships as adults were raised in families where abuse and neglect were the norm. They didn't grow up around people who were able to instill in them a stronger sense of self-worth, or teach them how to deal more constructively with conflict, or how to reach out for help when problems arose at home.

So the cycle of violence that was familiar in childhood repeats itself in adulthood, and victim's children (who themselves are now victims) begin to learn that violence is the norm, even though most adult victims promised themselves that they were going to choose a different kind of spouse, and have a different kind of family, than the family in which they were raised.

The good news, despite these all-too-common circumstances, is that change is possible. We've learned a lot as a church and a society about the cycle of violence in families, and the psycho-social contributors to violent behavior, and we know better today (than we did a generation ago) how to identify the signs of violence and neglect, and how to intervene in unhealthy situations and teach healthier life skills to children and adults.

Our friends at CAP (Child Assault Prevention, Inc.), for example, provide a tremendous service to children and families and our community through the "Safe, Strong, and Free" prevention education that they offer in our local public schools, and through the clinical crisis counseling that they offer children who have been victims of abuse and neglect. Through their important ministry, and the work of similar types of organizations, interventions are occurring in victims' lives earlier, so that the cycle of violence is interrupted and healthier patterns of behavior can be taught, learned, and repeated, and families can and do flourish in spite of past experiences of suffering.

Signs that change is needed in our domestic relationships may be subtle or dramatic, or they may be somewhere in between, but that these signs occur is something that we should expect and be watching for.

#### IV

*Metanoia* can occur in any part of our experience, and signs of the need for change can likewise be occurring in other aspects of our life, such as the need for a vocational change. We saw one example of vocation change in Mark's gospel lesson today, with the call of the disciples.

Not many, if any, of us started off in the fishing industry, like the disciples. But most of us can relate to the need to discern, deepen, or even change course in our vocations. The ever-changing marketplace in which we live has prompted some of us to have to "re-invent" ourselves.

I recall, for example, the president of my college *alma mater* talking about the rapid economic change that my generation should expect in our adulthood, and explaining how all of us who were graduating were going to have to “reinvent ourselves” at least five times in our adulthood.

While I have remained on the path of ordained ministry throughout my adulthood, I can say in retrospect that I have had to reinvent myself in ministry several times, as the challenges and opportunities presented in each setting where I have served have challenged me in new and different ways—and as the world around me has changed. I imagine that most of you have faced similar challenges and opportunities in your respective professional lives.

Sometimes the sign that change is needed in our vocational lives is subtle, and sometimes it is dramatic. Subtle signs that a change is needed may simply be a gnawing sense that there has to be more to life than this—whatever *this* is—this particularly job, this employer, or this career path.

Sometimes, too, by contrast, we find that we must reinvent ourselves because employment opportunities in our profession have evaporated as a result of mechanization or computerization, or as the kind of work that we have done has been outsourced to another country.

Regardless of the source of motivation, we may find ourselves nudged internally or challenged by external circumstances—or both—to change course, to embrace *metanoia*.

## V

A further type of invitation and opportunity for change that may have occurred, or that may be before us today, has to do with the need for systemic and social change in our lives and communities.

Soon we will celebrate Black History month and Women’s history month, and remember and honor the great cloud of witnesses who have labored for racial and social justice in our nation. Each of these persons knew that the change needed in their own lives required a change of attitudes, practices, and laws in our society, and they labored for these changes, often at great sacrifice to themselves.

Fannie Lou Hammer was one of those great African American women leaders who reflect the kind of clarity, courage, and commitment to racial and social justice that we might emulate. For her, the work of racial and social justice was ignited by the simple awareness that she was “sick and tired of being sick and tired.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fannie\\_Lou\\_Hamer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fannie_Lou_Hamer)

Of course, Fannie Lou Hammer, wasn't the only person who was sick and tired of being sick and tired. Many people were sick and tired of Jim Crow and institutional racism in our country, so what made Fannie Lou Hammer special was that she was inspired by—rather than mired in—her sick-and-tired feelings, and as a result she was able to lead the charge for the racial integration of the Democratic Party, voting rights and fair polling practices in the Deep South, and racial and social justice in our nation as a whole.

## VI

So, now, perhaps in retrospect as we think about the trajectory of our lives, or the examples of others who have inspired social transformation, we are aware of the gnawing sense—if not an acute awareness—that change is needed in our lives. And perhaps, now, more than ever, we realize that Jesus wasn't just “whistling Dixie” when he called the first disciples to follow him. He asked of them metanoia—life altering change. He asks no less of us. The invitation has gone out. What is our response? Amen.