

John 1:35-51 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

## The First Disciples of Jesus

<sup>35</sup> The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, <sup>36</sup> and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" <sup>37</sup> The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup> 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?" <sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. <sup>41</sup> He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed<sup>[a]</sup>). <sup>42</sup> He brought Simon<sup>[a]</sup> to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter<sup>[a]</sup>).

## Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael

<sup>43</sup> The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." <sup>44</sup> Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup> 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." <sup>46</sup> Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." <sup>47</sup> When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" <sup>48</sup> Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." <sup>49</sup> Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" <sup>50</sup> Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." <sup>51</sup> And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you,<sup>[a]</sup> you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

John 15:12-14 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>12</sup> "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you.

## Jesus Begins His Ministry in Galilee

<sup>12</sup> Now when Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. <sup>13</sup> He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup> so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

<sup>15</sup> “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—  
<sup>16</sup> 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.”

<sup>17</sup> From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”<sup>[b]</sup>

## Jesus Calls the First Disciples

<sup>18</sup> As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup> And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” <sup>20</sup> Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. <sup>22</sup> Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

## Jesus Ministers to Crowds of People

<sup>23</sup> Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news<sup>[d]</sup> of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. <sup>24</sup> So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. <sup>25</sup> And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

**January 26, 2020**

**John 1:35-51; Matthew 4:12-25; John 15: 12-14**

**“Make for Yourself a Teacher”**

**Kerra Becker English**

There is a Mishnah, a Jewish teaching that says: *Make for yourself a teacher; acquire for yourself a friend, and judge every person on the positive side.*

*[Talmud, Mishnah Brackhot (blessings), tractate Pirkei Avot (Ethics of our Fathers) Chapter 1:6]*

This teaching talks about how we have relationships outside of our household relationships. This isn't about family. It's about those relationships we have with people who are NOT our parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, children, or siblings. How we find and nurture such relationships is the way we find who our true connections are. Who will you learn from? Who will be your friend? How will you treat acquaintances?

But the wording might sound a bit awkward to us. *Make for yourself a teacher.* What does that mean? It helps me to understand it by thinking about what it doesn't say. It doesn't say – go get yourself some students. Rather than the teacher seeking to glorify themselves by gathering up a bunch of adherents to their way, the student has to find the teacher. So, this teaching says that you get to choose who you let advise you and mentor you. You get to choose who you will allow to claim the wisdom or the expertise to be a guide in your life. This is a rather important decision for the STUDENT to get to make.

We tend to think of these stories we read from both John and Matthew's gospel as the “calling of the disciples,” like Jesus yanked them from the lives that they knew and turned them into

students on the spot. What I want us to remember today is that each of these students had a tremendous amount of agency in this situation. They could choose to follow John or Jesus. They could say no, or in Nathanael's case, sass back. Can any qualified teacher *really* come out of a hick town like Nazareth? Jesus, as an up and coming teacher, did the inviting, nevertheless it was an invitation, and it was not a problem for the curious to say – Tell me more before I make such an important decision. *In John's gospel*, that invitation is, "Come and see." Are you looking for a teacher? Well, come and see what Jesus has to say. Here's the address. Come to the house where he is staying and listen to him talk away the afternoon. Do you question if this guy can be the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote? Come and hear him speak the truth, and see if he convinces you that he is someone who teaches with both priestly authority and spiritual authenticity.

*In Matthew's gospel*, Jesus hangs out with the fishermen. He speaks their language and understands their livelihood. If you've ever been fishing with a child, and the child ends up being the one who catches all the big fish – and smiles back at you with that huge grin – maybe that's what Jesus had in mind. "I can teach you to fish for people." This was an enticing offer – one that Peter, Andrew, James, and John – the fishermen among Jesus' disciples could not refuse.

*Make for yourself a teacher.*

*Then, acquire for yourself a friend.*

This too is strangely worded. To acquire something usually means that you buy it or develop it. I *acquired* the books I wanted from Amazon. I *acquired* the skills to solve the math problem.

Don't friends just appear in our lives? Well, not exactly. There is an investment involved, and a

mutual investment at that. To cultivate a new friendship requires time, attention, and value placed on the relationship. It sounds strange, but you have to work at making friends. In the best friendships, both parties have to build the trust to be able to talk freely and then foster the commitment to listening well when it's not your turn to talk. We tend to look back fondly at those early childhood friendships that were really a result of adults putting kids in the same room together. We remember college days or life in our first job when the proximity of dormitory life or the drudgery of daily tasks made for quick friends – or even quicker enemies. But I read article after article now about how hard it is for adults to make new friends. Men, in particular, are truly suffering from the loneliness of feeling friendless in a culture that discourages them from closeness. Some studies rank it up there next to smoking as a stressor related to heart disease. Women move in retirement, often living alone except for the connection to whichever child lives closest, and they find themselves searching for the companionship of other women. No matter whether you are feeling a lack of friends, or just want to deepen the friendships you already have, literally, the LORD knows, we need our friends.

Jesus knew and taught the importance of friendship. There comes a point when the disciples aren't just his students anymore, and he counts them as his friends. The dynamics have changed as they grew into their love for one another. He needs them just as much as they need him. He says it in teacher language – I command you. But his commandment comes out of a deep, deep love for them. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

I am a firm believer in friendships. It helps me to love the people that I live with to have outside friends who enrich my life and allow me to not have to be the wife, the mother, the daughter, the

sister, or in my case, not to be the pastor sometimes either. Friendships are the best. And they often begin with a negotiation towards acquirement. Like in Tennessee, we introduced ourselves to new neighbors by asking: can we play on your slip and slide? Here in Virginia, when I was experimenting with interfaith dialogue, I reached out and asked: would you like to be the Rabbi for a theological discussion with me at a comedy club? Adding in: We're inviting Santa to participate too! My closest friendships have come out of some strange early conversations. But the basics apply here too: Want to join a book club? I could use a fishing buddy. Hey we need another person to help pack holiday bags at the church. These little requests and invitations start small and build with grabbing coffee, doing knitting projects, hanging out at each other's houses -whatever it is that prompts conversation and compassion. The friends I have acquired over the years make my life far richer, far better than getting stuck not asking because of those times when I asked and my invitation fell completely flat. That happens too. Not everyone is enamored with me at first. Not everyone will be as invested in the time it takes to create a friendship, and some tries will end up as no more than acquaintances. That's OK too, and we need a way of simply navigating those "other people" who are not in the categories of family, friends, or teachers.

There's some advice for that in this Mishnah too: *Judge every person on the positive side. Judge EVERY person on the positive side.* That's a tall order in today's world. I've started to realize just how judgey people can be based on grammar alone. Sadly, it's taken having a dyslexic child to realize how often well-educated folks write off people as stupid just because they can't spell or write as well as those who have earned themselves a spot in the grammar police. It starts there and goes way, way down a rather ugly-looking rabbit hole when we think about how we judge other people. We do have a greater human tendency to be quick to judge on the negative side,

and it takes spiritual instruction by authoritative teachers to get us to do anything differently than that. Judge not, unless you want to be judged. That's another way to say this.

Judging people positively – especially on first glance allows us to make a habit out of presuming the best of humanity. That person may have cut you off in traffic because they are rushing a sick kid to the doctor. That person who snapped at you in line may be going home to care for a parent with dementia, and this was their only alone time today standing in line at a grocery store. That person who has a different opinion from you on what you consider to be an important issue – may have a reason for feeling how they do – and you'll never get to know it if you start from a position of: I'm 100% right, and they're 100% wrong.

This teaching doesn't mean you have to allow yourself to be walked all over by difficult people. Rather, it's an approach to how we see others in our outside world that may have a calming effect. Another way of translating this last piece – from my friend Rabbi Patrick- is “judge all men with the scale weighted in his favor.” That sounds like grace to me. That sounds like God's ultimate scale of judgment. We get to be considered as being a little better than we really are. God sees us, always, through the eyes of love and compassion – and even when we're not quite so worthy of that favor – God allows it. To grow in our understanding of God is to grow in our ability to judge more regularly on the positive side.

*Make for yourselves a teacher.*

*Acquire for yourselves a friend.*

*Judge every person on the positive side.*

*May we each be blessed with wise teachers, kind friends, and grace-filled encounters in our lives. Amen.*