

“Sent Out, Staying Home” Matthew 4:18-25 Rev. Steve Clifton
August 16, 2020 Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON

Bob McClure, is the closest thing that we in the United Church of Canada have to a home grown saint. We name churches after him. There are 8 McClure United's in our denomination. There are two other church institutions in his name.

If you are a certain generation you probably know Bob McClure's story. In 1923, as a young man fresh from medical school, he left family and the familiar behind and set out from Toronto to become a medical missionary in China. There he worked for 25 years under difficult conditions; he went on to serve in Africa, India and Gaza ... always willing to answer the call of God that he felt so strongly...so strongly that life at home seemed to confine him and was almost unbearable for him. Dr McClure became a Canadian institution, the first lay moderator of the United Church. McClure models a particular way of discipleship, going out into the world in answer to the Saviors call.

And we see this way of discipleship in Matthew's gospel this morning where two sets of brothers leave their boats and their nets behind to follow Jesus.

In reading the gospel this week, the story of Simon, Andrew, James & John leaving their boats and nets behind, there is something else that might catch our attention.

“When (Jesus) had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.”

They left their father Zebedee. Poor, poor Zebedee.

Zebedee is working in his boat with his 2 sons and a few hired hands when a stranger wanders by and says to his boys: “Follow me...” And just like that James and John drop what they are doing and follow after Jesus, leaving their father, their family business, their work, their responsibilities ...leaving poor Zebedee behind to do his hard work without their help.

Won't the work be much harder now that his sons are gone? Will he be able to afford workers to replace them? Will he be financially ruined? Does he feel abandoned, hurt or betrayed? Who knows...? Or maybe Zebedee felt joy and pride, since being called to follow a rabbi was the greatest of honors that could come to a young person, like getting an impromptu scholarship to Harvard.

Today we read the story of the call of 4 great disciples, but why do these 4 get all the attention? Why does their kind of discipleship, the kind that involves getting up, going out, leaving family and the familiar behind, doing something daring and adventurous, why does this kind of discipleship get all the press?

Why is ministry seen as something we should abandon our families for? Why does the call to radical discipleship seem to eclipse the call to care for present relationships, the duty of

children to their parents, of spouses to their partners? Why is ministry seen as something we do somewhere else, somewhere other than where we are...?

Why must ministry and discipleship always lead us to escape the everyday and ordinary? Why would God's call always lead us away from the here and now?

Following Jesus may mean that we are called to a grand and adventurous ministry in the world, to do things that get noticed, like Simon, Andrew, James & John, like Bob McClure.

But what about discipleship lived locally. What about the ministry of helping our neighbours; of raising our children; of loving our family members; of reaching out to those right around us. What about the work of Zebedee who tended his boat and caught fish to feed his family while his sons followed Jesus in a different way.

I began today mentioning Bob McClure. I met Dr McClure years ago when I was a student and even though he was then quite old he was a dynamo, bright, energetic...

A few years ago I saw a stage production, a one man play based on McClure's life. In one scene he is writing home to his wife, Amy Hislop, about the adventures he was having in China and she, he noted as he wrote, was at home in Toronto taking care of their children, alone for years at a time. And you wonder if Bob McClure was the only saint in his family? There is Bob McClure, medical missionary and there is his spouse Amy who put up with loneliness and hardship at home, in order to make his calling possible. Maybe we should name a few churches after her too...?

There are other models of discipleship presented in the gospels. Jesus doesn't always send people out. Sometimes he calls them home.

Jesus heals a leper and sends him home. He heals a Centurion's servant and sends the Roman home to him.

He heals a paralytic and sends him home.

When the Gerasene demoniac is healed he wants to follow Jesus but Jesus sends him home to family and community.

And Jesus goes to a home to heal a man's daughter. He goes to a home to make a blind one see. He goes home with Peter to heal the disciple's mother in law and then she serves by cooking for Jesus at home.

Simon, Andrew, James & John drop their nets and head off to follow Jesus... Sometimes ministry or discipleship may call us to radical departures, to picking up and letting go.

But Jesus also came to be with us right where we are... A call to be a disciple may mean a call to serve God and to follow Jesus right where we are, in the ordinary and the everyday of our lives. A disciple may work from home.

One of my favorite authors is the American novelist Anne Tyler, who crafts stories about ordinary people living around the city of Baltimore. In her novel *Saint Maybe* she tells the story of Ian Bledsoe, a young man who takes on the task of raising his brothers three children when their parents die. He always dreams of “a real life”, of the things he might have done out in the world in the life he might have had... but instead he chooses to raise three kids alone. And he finds a wealth of grace in that, blessing in staying home. Is Ian Bledsoe a saint for staying home? Saint? Maybe.

It's hard to go out into the world as a disciple right now. Life in a pandemic. Travelling far is out. Staying home is in.

At the moment we are in, we are being reminded of discipleship as something that might be lived close to home. In caring for our families, our neighbors... In offering kindness and compassion to those we encounter where we are now... In bringing a ray of hope to those close to us, we can follow Jesus right where we are...