

No Rush
Delivered January 1, 2012

If you've met Rita and me, you would probably be comfortable identifying a few differences between us. They say that opposites attract to one another, so it shouldn't be a surprise that we have different personalities – I'm pretty happy I didn't marry someone who thinks exactly like me, because I'd probably drive myself crazy. One of these differences showed up early on in our relationship. Dating at Zion was a bit of a challenge, in part because we weren't often allowed to go off campus on dates, which meant we had to make the best of our on-campus opportunities to spend time together.

One of our ways of going on dates at Zion was what we called "date walks". It sounds great, but really it meant that we walked around the lovely Zion campus talking with another, but not holding hands because we weren't allowed to do that either. I discovered as we took our date walks that Rita and I approached the act of taking a walk very differently. She looked at walks like a power-walker looks at walks: a way to get from one place to another as quickly as possible. Surprisingly, I on the other hand, didn't see taking a walk from the same perspective. I wanted to walk like I had nowhere else to be. I didn't want to hurry to get to the next place.

The juxtaposition of the two must have made for some comical glances from our fellow students, because they would see Rita power-walking along the campus paths while I alternated between trying to catch up to her, and intentionally walking slower to see how long it would take her to notice that we weren't walking together any more. If you know either of us, you're probably not surprised by any of this because our approach to walking pretty closely corresponds to our approach to life in general. She is very driven and focused, and I'm much more patient and relaxed in just about everything.

Sometimes I think when we imagine Jesus on earth we see him power-walking through Israel, running up and down across the countryside and the cities, healing people, teaching people, having conflict with the religious leaders and in general getting his job done in a ruthlessly efficient manner. After all, we think, Jesus had the most important job the world has ever seen, so if anyone had a reason to power walk through the world it would have been Jesus. So we imagine that he wouldn't have wasted any time getting right to work.

The gospels don't really help us fight that perception because they are a relatively brief account of three whole years of Jesus' life, and within each of the gospels a significant portion of the writing is concerned with just the last week of Jesus' life. Consider that Jesus has a world-changing mission, so much to do, and that the Gospels move us through those events so quickly that we lose sight of the reality that 3 years is a long span of time, and a lot can happen in 3 years that doesn't make the pages of the gospel accounts.

In other words, we think about Jesus' life the way that we think about our own – we overestimate what we can accomplish now, and underestimate what we could accomplish over a longer period of time. We get fascinated with immediate results and miss the potential of a long, slow, but purposeful walk in the same direction. I'm just convinced that the way that Jesus walked through his 3 years of public ministry should

have an impression on both what and how we do what we do as a church. And as we look to a new year starting today, and the future that's beyond just this year, I want to be sure that we take the long view of what we're doing and how we're doing it.

I want to read this passage from Mark 2 as a way for us to think about how Jesus approached his ministry – let's read from **Mark 2:13-17**.

This passage in Mark 2 is repeated with very small variations in both Matthew's gospel and Luke's as well, so it clearly seems to be an important part of the early traditions about who Jesus was and what he was doing with his life. It shows up relatively early in their narratives of Jesus' life because it really sets the stage for what Jesus was going to do while he was here. We think (rightly so) of Jesus' mission as one that was going to change the world because he was going to begin the work of bringing God's Kingdom to the world.

When we hear about a mission that ambitious, we might expect Jesus' M.O. to be big, dramatic, and based on the crowds of people. While his ministry is definitely marked by miraculous signs and wonders, the bulk of his time seems to be spent with the 12 men who are following him more closely than the rest. He spends 3 years with these 12, and when he leaves them, he does so with the commission that they would continue his Kingdom task of making disciples of all the nations.

The story of Matthew's calling by Jesus is bookended by two important and related thoughts. The first is that Mark gives a key biographical detail about Matthew – he was a tax collector. Most likely he was a tax collector who collected the tolls that the Roman government placed on goods that traveled on the Roman roads. He worked for Rome, and made his quite comfortable living by overcharging for the taxes he collected. He essentially worked on a commission basis, giving the tax to the government and keeping for himself whatever he could collect above that. So understandably he and other tax collectors were not a popular group in Israel because they represented the oppressors, the Romans who came and took their freedom from them and resisted God's rule.

Second, at the end of the story in his conversation with the religious leaders, Jesus tells us exactly why he had come. While they grumbled about this Rabbi choosing to sit down to dinner with tax collectors and sinners (and worse, to have one for a disciple), Jesus is very clear about his mission: I'm here to extend God's call to the sinners. He hadn't come to extend God's call to the ones who thought they were already righteous, because that would be the equivalent of calling a doctor for a person who was completely healthy. Sick people need a doctor. Sinners need to follow Jesus.

We could have a long discussion about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, but the essence of the call to be a disciple is captured in Jesus' words to Matthew at the beginning of the passage: "come and follow me". Matthew hears this, gets up from the tax booth, and begins to follow Jesus. I want to point out for one moment what doesn't happen here. He does not confess that Jesus is the Messiah, he doesn't pray a prayer of commitment to Jesus, he doesn't even believe that Jesus was going to die and rise again (how could he?), he doesn't quote a creed or a catechism – he just gets up and starts following Jesus.

Which means that for the next three years of Jesus' life, Matthew is in the group following him most closely. But when you read the rest of the gospels you find that these men are actually quite inept at times. They misunderstood Jesus and his mission repeatedly. They often fail in the tasks Jesus asks them to do, and repeatedly fail to have the kind of faith that Jesus seeks in them. When Jesus is crucified and all 11 of them are watching what is happening to the one that has led them for 3 years, they all run away. You might wonder how effective Jesus' plan really was.

But I can't help but think that there was such value in the long, slow walk through those 3 years that prepared those men to carry out Jesus' mission once he was gone. These were truly disciples who apprenticed themselves to Jesus because they responded to his call to come and follow of their own free will. They allowed Jesus to shape them into disciples, but the gospels make very clear that this was not an overnight process.

And the last feature I want to point out from Mark 2 is that there are other people sitting at the table with Jesus and the 12 that are just as important to the rest of the story. Mark is careful to tell us that there are tax collectors and sinners sitting at the table with them, and that these were the kinds of people who were in the crowds that seemed to follow Jesus wherever he went. Contrary to what we might think, Jesus seemed to always have room for these people. His movement had room for the 12, but also for the tax collectors and sinners who were on the outside looking in, trying to see whether they wanted to just browse, or truly follow. Jesus keeps walking slowly forward, inviting these men and women to step out of the crowd to follow him more closely. Some do, and some don't but Jesus never gets in a rush. He just keeps presenting the opportunity to follow and inviting them to move forward with him.

If as a church we are supposed to keep doing what Jesus did then I think this is what we need to keep doing. We keep calling people to come follow Jesus with us, to become disciples who allow Jesus' presence in their lives to change them in really deep, powerful ways. At the same time, we commit not to rush, but to allow room for someone to come with doubts, fears, questions, and issues and not feel the pressure to answer every question or doubt right away. We want to create the environment here where a person can come walk next to Jesus, hear what he has taught, and see how his presence produces change in their lives.

In order to truly do that, we need to think smaller in order to have a bigger impact. We need to think smaller, like about the person in your life who God is trying to extend his call to through you. We need to think about the people who are still on the outside of this movement but who Jesus is drawing to himself. If we allow ourselves to be present with them without rushing to change them today, I'm convinced we would see a significant impact for God's Kingdom happen here.

So what you need to hear this morning is that wherever you are in the process, there is room for you here. I'm not in any rush to convert you, but I want to always be careful to extend the invitation for you to leave behind your life and your control of it, and instead come follow Jesus with us because we know he can change your life just like he has changed ours.