

TO THE OTHER SIDE
Matthew 8:18-27

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Story: "Missing the Boat"

The agreed upon time to meet was 3:30.

The last call for Carnival Cruise ship departing Nassau was 4:30. Kevin told his friend Thomas this. Thomas tried to say "4:00" but Kevin insisted, "NO, 3:30, we need to make it back!" They agreed.

Quick recap: This group of travelers was headed into Nassau on their own from the Carnival Cruise. Kevin, his wife, and two boys, 22 and 16 years old. His friend, Thomas, and his 12-year-old daughter went along. Once they arrived at Atlantis, Kevin, his wife, and the 22-year-old decided they would relax at the beach, while the 16-year-old would go to the water park with Thomas and his daughter. That's where it all went wrong.

3:30 comes, nothing. 3:45, nothing. 4:00, nothing! At 4:15, Kevin gives in. He sent his oldest son and wife back. They did not want to go, but he said that they had to. 4:30 comes and nothing! Finally, at 4:40 he decided to head back. Keep in mind, He has 3 FULL backpacks he took from the others. He can't seem to find anyone that is interested in being helpful. He asked for a ride on a golf cart to the front; they said no! So he gets in a cab and explains the story. The cabbie is flying to get him to the ship. Then, suddenly, TRAFFIC!

Why didn't his wife just call? She and the other 10 or so friends on the ship did. When he'd answer, the phone would disconnect. When he'd call back, it would not go through.

Finally he makes it to the port. He can see the ship! As soon as he exits the cab, someone in a golf cart SCREAMS, "are you Kevin?" He yells, "run and jump on the cart!" He jumps on, he's HAULING to the ship, flying over bumps. He's excited because the ship is still there. His heart is pumping but he breathes a sigh of relief. He made it.

Wait. Why is the ship moving? He can literally jump off the dock and touch the ship if he wanted, but no ramps or doors are left! He's looking up at the bridge, begging them to stop, but no, it kept going. That's when he went numb. Anger, sadness, emotions all going at one time. He wanted to scream, but couldn't. He wanted to cry, but couldn't. He kept looking at the ship, thinking that maybe by mind control I could turn the ship back, but obviously that didn't work. The ship was gone...

This is when reality kicked in. He's alone in a country that he's not familiar with. What do I do now? Did my son make it back? Why did Captain Johnny leave me?!

Kevin had “missed the boat.” He learned several things that day: that Thomas was terrible at meeting up, that when traveling in a foreign country you should know how to dial a phone, but especially, that a cruise ship waits for no man.

Here in the middle of Matthew chapter 8, it’s time for the boat to leave. And if you’re not following Jesus on his terms, you’re not going with him to the other side.

We’ve been walking through Matthew’s gospel together for several weeks. In chapters 5, 6, and 7 we followed him up the mountain and heard his sermon. At the end of those teachings, we were told that people were astounded – astonished by his teaching. They recognize that he teaches as one who has authority, unlike their scribes. But Jesus didn’t come just to teach.

In chapter 8, he came down the mountain and his power is immediately on display through 3 successive healing stories. In fact, chapters 8 and 9 of Matthew offer 9 separate miracle stories, broken up by 2 different narrative breaks, where the miracle stories are separated by lessons about the call to discipleship. They’re almost like case studies that help us to think more deeply about our own response to what we’ve just heard.

Verse 18 marks another change in scenery in the middle of Matthew’s gospel. Crowds have now gathered around Jesus. The cleansing of a leper, the healing of a Centurion’s servant, and the episode at Peter’s house have now drawn quite a gathering.

With these great crowds pressing in, he demands his disciples, “orders,” that they “go away” with him. It might, at first, seem like a simple description of the events, but we quickly find out in these verses that Matthew is using these moments of movement to frame a deeper meaning. True disciples – not the crowd who have come for the show but true disciples – will be those who respond immediately to this call and follow him to the other side.ⁱ

The first time Jesus took notice of the crowd was the beginning of chapter 5, and that time he ascended up the mountain to teach them. This time, he gives the command that forces the issue of discipleship. The command to go to the other side separates the ones who are just tagging along from disciples who follow him and obey what he commands.

The other side of this lake, the sea of Galilee, will be the country of the Gadarenes, or Gerasenes in Luke’s account. It’s not an unreasonable distance, but it’s well out of Jewish country and into the Greek-Hellenistic world outside of the control of Herod’s rule. They’ll be met there by a heard of pigs, another reminder that it isn’t a Jewish region.ⁱⁱ

This is the scene that Matthew records 2 immediate encounters with Jesus. The first: a scribe.

“Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.”

So far in Matthew, these legal experts haven’t exactly been the heroes. In fact, in almost every instance they’re portrayed negatively. Given that he’s leaving Jewish-country, it’s even more

surprising that this scribe is a fan. Most of them aren't. But regardless of his enthusiasm and interest, he's not presented here as a true disciple.

"Teacher," he calls him. It's an acceptable name in Mark's gospel, but the only people in Matthew who call Jesus that are outsiders. It's not ever used by real disciples.

Jesus' reply seems almost cryptic, ***"The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."***

1. Following Jesus requires sacrificing security and comfort.

It almost leaves us thinking that he's asking for a place to stay, for this man to give him some lodging. But what his response is actually revealing is that Jesus knows that this man has not yet thought out what a commitment to him really entails. He has no idea what's actually involved in discipleship to Jesus. And Jesus knows he's probably not willing to accept the cost.

It's remarkable that a scribe is even interested, but his interest is misplaced. It makes for messy English, but most literally, we might translate the scribe's statement: "I will follow you where you may be going away to." It may be that he was ambitious, or maybe he's just adventurous. It seems like he was only interested in tagging along with a guy who was *going places*.

Maybe his interest was really just in a fun trip across the lake, not a long-term commitment. Either way, his eagerness is not a virtue, and he's misunderstood what following Jesus costs.

Jesus, we know, was a carpenter's son. In Nazareth, this is a reasonably secure place in the world. And even though he left that, he has a temporary home in Capernaum, and he seems to have been able to find hospitality where he went. It's not that he never had a bed. Although, we should notice that his next rest will be exposed on a boat in a storm. There were probably many nights spent in places more exposed than foxes and birds.

The ministry he is doing, the mission he is on, has no guarantees of lodging. Foxes have dens they return to. Birds have nests. But the itinerant mission I'm on, Jesus tells him, is not a road that leads to "success, tranquility, or security."ⁱⁱⁱ I'll be going from place to place to place and not one of them will be home. I'm on the move – and following me means being on the move with me, never really settled in this world, not even truly at home.

Before Jesus was born, He was turned out because there was no room for Him in the inn. John tells us that when he got to Judea they rejected Him (John 5:18), Galilee casts Him out (John 6:66). When he gets to Gadara they beg him to leave its district (Matthew 8:34). Samaria refuses Him lodging (Luke 9:53). He came to His own and they would not receive Him (John 1:11).^{iv}

Jesus is telling this man that he misunderstands the real cost. Based on his silence, we find out that Jesus was right. The man wasn't willing to commit to that. The man said, "Teacher, I will

follow You wherever You go,” but his actions demonstrated that he wouldn’t even follow across the lake, to the other side. The cost was too high.

“I’ll follow you!” we say. Until we realize that following Jesus means giving up what we found most comfortable, what we’ve made into a refuge. It means being less at home here than we’d really prefer.

The second scene (V.21) finds “another” of the disciples, presumably not one of the 12, but one of this crowd who has been following him around. He asks:

21 Another of the disciples said to Him, “Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.”

2. Following Jesus requires prioritizing his kingdom above all else.

Worst Excuses Ever: For the last 10 years, job listing site CareerBuilder has put out a list it calls “The Most Unbelievable Excuses for Calling in Sick.”^v It turns out that when “my dog ate my homework” grows up, it gets even more creative.

Last year an employee said he couldn’t come in because his false teeth flew out the window while he was driving down the highway. Another claimed that someone had glued her windows and doors shut so she couldn’t get out of her house. Then there was the employee who said she couldn’t come in because she had woken up in a good mood and didn’t want to ruin it.

Employers reported hearing these real-life excuses over the last year:

- I just put a casserole in the oven.
- My feet and legs fell asleep when I was sitting in the bathroom, and when I stood up I broke my ankle.
- I’m stuck in the blood pressure machine at the grocery store.
- I put my uniform in the microwave to dry and it caught fire.
- I accidentally got on a plane.

And then there was this excuse, which wins serious points for honesty: I woke up in a good mood and don't want to ruin it. Recommended: Just do with “I’m sick.”

There are legitimate reasons to miss work though: Jury duty, roads impassable, AND *death in the family*? There are a lot of excuses out there. The hard part about this passage is that this one seems so legitimate. He didn’t say I accidentally tried to dry my tunic in the microwave!

NT Wright points out: “For a devout Jew in Jesus’ day and in ours, one of the most solemn and sacred parts of the morning routine would be to say the basic Jewish prayer: “Hear, oh Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...”. Saying this prayer is regarded by official Jewish teaching as the most important thing to do each day. But there is one thing which takes precedence even over saying this prayer.

According to rabbi's teaching, when a man's father dies he has such a strong obligation to give him a proper burial that this comes first, before everything else – even before saying the "hear, Oh Israel" prayer.^{vi}

So, when Jesus finds a follower saying he has to go prepare for a funeral, you'd expect that Jesus would say "well, of course, you have to go and do that and then come and follow me." But instead he says one of the most shocking things in the whole gospel story.

The man seems to offer a reasonable condition. And Jesus seems to offer a calloused response. Whether in the Hebrew or the Greek world, the refusal to bury anyone, especially parents, would be completely irreverent. The idea of it would be offensive and unthinkable to the day's sensitivities.

Scholars have tried to find different ways to explain what might be going on here. And there are a few different ways we might interpret the request to "bury" his father. We tend to read this as referring to the immediate need to go have a funeral and burial. If that's the case, Jewish customs would have him performing a burial within 24 hours of death. That's a reasonable delay, right? He could catch up!

Others point out that ceremonies could last up to a week. So there's extended mourning, and Jewish customs also included an eventual second burial of the bones in separate place.

Kenneth Bailey, a scholar most familiar with Middle Eastern customs, has argued that we shouldn't read this with Western eyes. If his father had just died, he wouldn't be out on the roadside, he'd be keeping vigil for at least a week and making arrangements for the funeral. This idiom "bury his father," he argues, really refers to fulfilling his family duty of responsibly caring for this father for the remainder of his life, and settling his estate, regardless of whether or not death was imminent. That would make his request an indefinite one, postponing discipleship for years, not days. That makes Jesus' reply a little less shocking – but only some.

That may be the case, but that's all just a distraction from the point. This is meant to be a shocking, hard saying. There is not more legitimate excuse than this – and that's the point. Absolutely nothing can take priority over Jesus' call to discipleship.

Either way you read it, Jesus is cutting across cultural norms and throwing deeply-rooted expectations aside to say this: "there are no excused absences in the kingdom of God."^{vii} There is no more time to be lost. Whether you've got business commitments, or social obligations, or – yes – even sacred family duties. True Disciples can't shuttle back and forth between the old life and the new.

Robert Tannehill says: Discipleship for Jesus... "is not merely another commitment which we add to the long list of our commitments, but it is *the* commitment – demanding a reordering of our lives from the bottom up."^{viii}

This is the only excuse Matthew records. Can you imagine how many others were there? I can. Because I've made most of them before. I imagine you have too. "I'll go where you're leading," Jesus... After things at work settle down...When we get more stable at home, or when we can afford it...When we're a little less busy. "I go where you're leading," but when the storms clear up, as long as my kids have the best opportunity possible. But I need to learn more or get myself straightened up.

We could brainstorm a whole list of excuses together right now. And some of them would sound *so legitimate*. But when you hold them up to Jesus' call... it might as well be an accidental plane ride, while stuck in the blood pressure cuff at the grocery store.

When He got into the boat, His disciples followed Him.

Because that's what true disciples do. Verse 18: Jesus gave orders to depart. Verse 23: His disciples followed him. Don't miss this amidst the 2 cameos we get from others. Jesus commands, and they follow. Are you paying attention to where Jesus is going? Are you listening for where he might be leading you?

3. Following Jesus requires confidence in Jesus' power.

As they go to the other side, there's a great storm we're told. It's a known occurrence on the sea of Galilee. Storms can pop up in a hurry. The waves are so serious that the boat is getting swamped, its hidden by the waves. Jesus, on the other hand, is calm. He's taking this opportunity for a little rest. After all, he's from the foothills of Nazareth and he's in the company of experienced fisherman. They're the ones who should be able to handle this.

In this moment of trouble, the disciples look at each other, and finally one of them gets up the courage to go and wake the one who spoke it all into motion. They seem to get it right, though. They don't ask him to speak to God, they ask him to act as if he were God. And he is. They say, save us! And he does.

Jesus scolds them before he calms the sea because he wants them to realize that following him is going to bring all kinds of storms. They'll have to trust in his power to follow in his way. The moment he rises all the terrifying chaos is overcome by his power. There is only complete calm. They couldn't help but hear the psalms and the prophets echoing in their ears: *At the rebuke of the Lord, the seas halt.*

Psalm 89:8-9:

O Lord God of hosts, who is like You, O mighty Lord? Your faithfulness also surrounds You. You rule the swelling of the sea; When its waves rise, You still them.

So, the answer to their rhetorical question – "who is this?" – is clear. This man whose power extends even over creation: this is God with us.

Kevin Missing the Boat: It turns out that when you miss a cruise ship, “just fly to the next port” isn’t nearly as simple as it seems. Customs, papers, tickets, travel, customs again. Kevin was even erased from the ship log. Kevin estimated his costs well over \$1000 in hotel, motel, air, cabs, passport, food. Now that doesn't include the phone bill. Also, the costs that his friend incurred, the internet, the van he rented, his phone. That’s the cost of “missing the boat.”

Dallas Willard^{ix} writes that we count the cost of discipleship but often forget that “the cost of non-discipleship” is far greater. We consider what we’d have to give up, but we forget to consider what is to be gained. The value of what is received by following Jesus is infinitely greater than whatever it may cost.

Jesus has a mission in the world. It involves crossing traditional boundaries. It will go on, because King Jesus goes on, and he calls people to follow, and some always will. “Just as Jesus commanded them to depart to the other side, he makes clear to us that the call to discipleship is never the adding on of another worthy cause to our list of obligations. It is the shocking transformation of all we ever assumed about discipleship.”^x

So here sit the disciples back on calm water. They’ve followed Jesus and now seen his power. And there sit a certain scribe and another disciple and countless many others.

It may be that you have to leave a good excuse behind, and the way is full of storms, and the “other side” is almost always unfamiliar territory. We’re not told what this scribe or other disciple did next, but the silence is pretty clear. It’s meant to ask us:

Where will you be? Safely on the shore? Surrounded by excuses? Missing the boat?
Or, on your way to the other side?

*God, Give us the faith to go where you lead us.
Give us the courage to go when you call.
Give us the confidence to trust in your power, no matter the cost.*

ⁱ David Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 98.

ⁱⁱ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 325.

ⁱⁱⁱ Garland, 98.

^{iv} Scott L. Harris, “Will You Follow Jesus?,” 2/14/1993

^v <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-worst-excuses-for-skipping-work/> accessed 10/1/19

^{vi} NT Wright, *Matthew For Everyone*, Part 1, 86.

^{vii} Garland, 99.

^{viii} Robert Tannehill, *The Sword of His Mouth*, 159.

^{ix} Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*.

^x M. Eugene Boring, *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Vol. VII*, 155.