

Just Call Me Maybe...on the Sea of Galilee

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This past summer I was in Israel and travelled to the town of Tiberius. In Tiberius, as I strolled on the boardwalk and watched all the people, I stared at the flashing lights of a dance disco across the harbor on the Sea of Galilee. As I listened to the music and watched the disco in the distance, people around me strolled lazily on that summer evening. As I watched, it occurred to me that the disciples were most likely 16, 17, or 18 years old and could just have easily been the ones walking around the boardwalk. You could find those fishermen walking on the boardwalk after a boring day fishing. Perhaps you could come across their dad, Zebedee, who owned a souvenir store that sold fishing equipment for all we know. Later on, those young fishermen could have headed over to the disco to listen to pop music. Music such as “Call me Maybe” by Carly Rae Jepsen could be playing. With over 500 million YouTube hits, Just Call Me Maybe has become somewhat of a global anthem which invites us to kickback, avoid commitment, have fun and keep our options open. As the song goes, “I just met you, here’s my number, just call me....maybe.”

2000 years ago on the shores of Galilee near the location of the Tiberius board walk, Jesus approached those young fishermen who lived boring and somewhat aimless lives. Young men who might have been a bit hung over after a big night at the disco. And here is what happened:

“As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21 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. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.”

Jesus did not say to the disciples, “just call me maybe”. Instead Jesus said, “I am calling you really and I will make you fishers of all people”. And so the disciples dropped their nets and followed Jesus. When those teenagers followed Jesus they went with him through out all of Galilee, “teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23).

As I stood on the shores of the Sea Galilee staring at the lapping water, with Alex, my 20 year old son, I thought a lot about those young disciples. I thought about how so often we drift through life moving from one thing to another. We do not stop to ask what God is really calling us to do and be. Could we consider the question posed by the poet Mary Oliver when she asked “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” Jesus is asking us the same question, “what is it that we plan to do

with our one wild and precious life?” It does not matter really how young or old you might be. It does not matter. What does matter is that all of us have a calling. Not maybe but really.

All of us have something that stirs in us, something that invites us to have a higher sense of purpose and to make a commitment. There are only so many Carly Rae Jepsen songs we can take before, we ask ourselves “is this it”? Then we ask, “what would it mean to escape our lethargy and do our best?” What would it mean to be of good courage, commit, stretch and serve? It could mean dropping our nets to follow a Christ who teaches us how to be instruments of love, healing, and grace in the world. Jesus calls us to do this ministry with intensity and rigor. How is it that we would wish to be known in this life? For Jesus, he was known for his healing work, which spread throughout all Syria. The Bible tells us “that they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them” (Matthew 4: 25).

And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. After Jesus called the disciples on the Sea of Galilee and had them join him in his healing ministry, Jesus went to a mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 4: 24-5)

Here is a picture of the Mount of the Beatitudes I took earlier this summer. It is not far from Tiberius. And there on that mountain or high bluff, Jesus sat with his disciples and he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5: 1-11)

Standing on the Mount of the Beatitudes, I cannot help but point out that if you gaze across the sea to the North, you will see Syria in the distance. Jesus, as we just heard, spent a good deal of time in Syria healing people before he went atop the Mount of the Beatitudes to deliver his sermon to his disciples. Things don’t change much do they? In the next 48 hours, the United States Congress will take a vote on whether the United

States will attack Syria. As Congress prepares for such a vote, I wonder how many of our elected representatives are reading the Beatitudes between their CIA briefings?

Blessed are the poor, the meek, the vulnerable and the hungry for theirs is the kingdom of God. And most notably, blessed are the peace makers for theirs' is the kingdom of God. It seems to me as we think about a response to what is happening in Syria, we suffer from two crises. The first crisis is, of course, a civil war where 100,000 have died and has produced over 2 million refugees--half of them children. The use of chemical weapons by someone (and, by the way, it is really not clear who is responsible) and has resulted in over a 1,000 deaths. Many Christians and other minorities live in fear of an Islamist state should the rebels prevail.

The other crisis is a profound failure of imagination in Washington. There is a failure in imagination of how respond to the Syrian crisis which could prevent a lot more death and misery from taking place. The facts justifying this strike do not appear complete, many of which don't look well substantiated and at times feel contorted to make a case for war. We also hear that a military strike will be limited and will not lead us to a wider war. The rhetoric is carefully calibrated to make it sound like there will be a few surgical strikes and then we will be done. We are told we can fix this problem, which is not very well defined. But when it comes to war these assurances that conflict won't spread are not assurances we can make, even when presidents make them. It is very plausible that the nice boardwalk in Tiberias or the mountain on which Jesus delivered his sermon might easily be destroyed should Syria and Iran wish to retaliate.

Then what? Will the United States now be drawn into a wider war defending Israel? Will Israel then retaliate? What other unpredictable things could happen? Great leaders know how to change their minds, admit they are wrong and pick a different course. It is my earnest hope and prayer that amidst the bravado, lobbying, and press briefings such courage will be evident. At this moment, people of faith should be to actively suggesting alternative approaches more in keeping with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and which will not lead to more loss of life.

Andover Newton Theological School published what I thought were a helpful set of alternative suggestions in an articles "Bearing Witness on the Brink of War"¹. First, could we "intervene on behalf of the countless refugees, half of them children, pouring into Lebanon and Turkey at the moment?" How can we raise international support for "their protection and to supply the immediate needs of these masses?" This would be so much cheaper and more humane than a military strike.

Second, "we must welcome refugees into our land, at least temporarily. How can our communities of faith extend a welcome to those who need a home and resources to relocate and how can we facilitate connections with other Syrians already living in our communities?"

Third, the use of chemical weapons is morally reprehensible, and it should be punished. The International Criminal Court should immediately start war crime tribunals and proceedings against those responsible for the use of chemical weapons in Syria. And

the U.S. can take evidence that Assad's regime used chemical weapons to the UN Security Council and seek a resolution against Syria.

And finally, can we have a courage of presence? Are there figures who would garner the respect of both sides to lead to a temporary cease fire and broker a peace agreement? This is a well traveled approach used before in other conflicted countries which can have some success.

Just as those disciples 2000 years ago, went into Syria to offer healing and hope, we might be well to remember their example, take Jesus' lead and be healers and reconcilers. In our time, we can not live passively. This is not a time to say "just call me maybe". Instead, we live in a time when Jesus is calling us really. And we need to drop our nets and follow. Amen.

¹ Article can be accessed here: <http://www.ants.edu/news/detail/bearing-witness-on-the-brink-of-war/>
