

Sermon for Sunday, November 26, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"WHEN THE M.I.A. IS YOU"

St. Luke 5:1-11

Text: "And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him." St. Luke 5:11

The abbreviation "MIA" means missing in action. We all became especially aware of this expression during the war in Viet Nam. And even though the war there has been over for some time, there is still existing an organization of families who have loved ones missing in action. For a long time there was uncertainty about some of these missing soldiers. Were they alive or were they dead? The emotional cost to families has been enormous and the uncertainty and doubt have been tremendous.

Yet, the fact is, there are a lot of us missing in action this morning. Many of us are victims of life--the action seems to be going on all around us, but somehow we have missed out. Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever feel that the world doesn't know you are there--or even cares? Tennessee Williams, author of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof", has an introduction to his play entitled, "Person to Person". In it he writes, "I once saw a group of little girls on a Mississippi sidewalk, all dolled up in their mothers' and sisters' castoff finery, old raggedy ball gowns and plumed hats and high-heeled slippers, enacting a meeting of ladies in a parlor with a perfect mimicry of polite Southern gush and simper. But one child was not satisfied with the attention paid her enraptured performance by the others, they were too involved in their own performances to suit her, so she stretched out her skinny arms and threw back her skinny neck and shrieked to the deaf heavens and her equally oblivious playmates, "Look at me, look at me, look at me!"

Yes, somehow she was missing in action even though she was there all of the time. Carl Jung, in his book entitled, The Undiscovered Self, states that the crisis of the 20th century is a crisis of the individual--it is the crisis of finding meaning for life, for making life count, for feeling like a person of worth. And while it is true that you and I live in the most affluent society in the history of the world, still we have a great poverty--it is the poverty of identity. So many of us do not know who we are or where life is going. We are struggling to find some meaning to life that will give it direction and purpose. Too often we feel as though nobody sees us and even though we cry out, in so many different ways, "look at me, look at me," it seems the world ignores us and acts as though we don't exist.

A friend of mine who was a professor of pastoral psychology at one of our Presbyterian seminaries, once wrote me, "Carl Rogers and other noted behavioral scientists have convinced me that the psychological understandings of man and the psychotherapeutic ethics which accompany them are claiming the allegiance of a great proportion of the college educated population inside and outside the churches." He went on to add, "Overflow crowds greet Erich Fromm or Carl Rogers wherever they speak these days, and on any and all subjects." Then he concluded, "Their week-end workshops have an evangelistic spirit about them." And why is this? It is because modern man is fighting the most important battle of his life--the battle for self-hood, the battle to discover who and what he is and to find some worth in himself as a person. Why do you think drugs, alcohol and other chemicals have become such a problem in our world? Is it not because people feel they are missing in action and are trying to flee from the realities of life?

There are many threats to self-hood today. There are many things that make us loose our sense of worth. For example, with the complexity of modern life,

bureaucracy is more and more becoming the dominating force in life. When this happens, persons are treated in terms of masses and averages and statistics and generalities that ignore our self-hood. Part of the rebellion of youth today against the establishment, against institutions, can be understood only in these terms. George Orwell, in his book, 1984, takes this theme and shows us what can happen to life when government--Big Brother--dominates life. In 1984 Big Brother cannot tolerate individuality and the man who dares to be a self, to be unique, to have a goal and aim in life, must be brainwashed and broken until he conforms.

Another threat to our self-hood today is the urbanizing of society. The great sprawling cities of today are depersonalizing. We often do not know our neighbors. We may be attacked or robbed or killed and the faceless crowd pauses to watch in detached curiosity without a hand to reach out in our behalf, a hand that says, "you are a person of worth and I have a concern for you." Identity in the urban areas is more and more found in the group--in what one author has called the "other-directed character." By this he means persons whose character is formed chiefly by the crowd--by the example of his contemporaries and his peers. In this cult of uniformity we begin to clap our hands together and march in step, shout slogans and chant choruses. We react rather than act, become as another writer has put it, "record-players rather than musicians." If you have been watching the mob scenes in Iran you see a perfect picture of this response to find meaning and significance to life. In a way, what is happening in Iran are a lot of small people shouting like that little girl on a Mississippi street, "look at me, look at me."

Yes, a lot of us feel we are somehow missing in action. Life is passing us by. Do you know why that is so? It is because we do not have some grand goal, some great dream, some magnificent vision to which we have given our lives and for which we are willing to die. Take your own life this morning. Is there some great and grand goal on which you have set your sights, to which you have committed your life, that is worth giving all you have and are to? What are you doing this morning that you are willing to die for? If success is your goal, are you willing to die for it? If making money and accumulating possessions is your heart's desire, are you willing to die for it? There is a lot of self-centered "me-ism" today that puts self as number one. Are you willing to give your life to the satisfaction of your own wants and wishes and desires? I know a lot of people who are. I know men who are ruining their families, their relationships to their loved ones, because they put themselves first. It is wrecking dreadful havoc in their lives and the lives of their loved ones. But are you willing for life to mean no more than that?

There was a time, early in the history of our country, when men were willing to die for something. Those were the times when men said, "Give me liberty or give me death." Those were times when men said, "my only regret is that I have but one life to give for my country." But that isn't so true today, is it?

What the world needs today--and what you and I need--is a dream, a vision, a magnificent goal to which we can give our lives--that would make life worth living. So many of us today are giving ourselves to cheap goals, to small dreams, to insignificant things. But in our hearts there is an emptiness.

Peter and Andrew, James and John, had empty lives, too. They had given themselves to fishing, to making a living, perhaps to prospering. But their hearts were empty. Surely they wanted something to give their lives meaning and purpose and direction. So, when a man came along and spoke of God, of the kingdom of heaven, the Bible says they left everything and followed him.

Do you know why they left everything to go with Jesus? It was because he told them that God loved them. That he had a wonderful plan for the world and for their lives. That he could bring meaning and purpose to their lives, something that would make life significant, worthwhile--something they could believe in and live for and die for.

Is there something in your life that you feel that way about? If not, maybe what you really need is Jesus. You see, what else is going to give meaning to life? Will it be communism? But communism says that my worth is in terms of what I produce. Will it be capitalism? But capitalism says that I am valued for what I possess. No, the only dream worth giving my life to is Jesus.

Had you ever thought of life just that way? I know there are a lot of us this morning who are discontent, unhappy, dissatisfied. We are looking for something or someone to whom we can give our lives. Maybe what we are really looking for is Jesus.

Isn't that what happened to Peter? As Jesus talked about God, Peter suddenly saw himself as he was and the Bible says, "he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" And do you know what Jesus said to Peter? He said, "come, follow me..."(Mark 1:17) In effect he said, "Peter, I know you for who and what you are. I know your sins and failures and I understand your shortcoming. Just the same, if you will follow me, I will give your life meaning and significance." And the Bible says that they left everything and followed him.

Recently I have been reading Charles Colson's new book entitled, "Life Sentence." In it he describes what happened to him after Watergate and his prison term. He tells how God led him into a full-time ministry in the prisons of America. At one time he had been one of the most powerful men in the American government and in the world. But that, too, had left him empty. When he got out of prison, he had many opportunities that would bring him wealth and prestige. Instead, God called him into a ministry to prisoners. Yet, in that ministry he has found meaning and significance for his life. He has found something to which he can give himself.

Have you found meaning for your life? Or, are you still missing in action with the world passing you by. Are you still desperately doing things and crying out, "look at me, look at me"? Jesus comes and he offers you a life that has meaning and significance--he gives you something to live for and something to die for. So many centuries ago when he came to Peter and the others, he said to them, "follow me..." And the Bible says that they left everything and followed him.

This morning Jesus still says--as he said so long ago--come, follow me. What is your answer to Him?