Do you have a hero? Your hero could be anyone, someone you know personally, someone famous, someone who has passed away, perhaps even someone who never even existed beyond the realm of imagination. When I was growing up, a magical thing would happen every day after school – after the ritualistic snack and chat with my mother I would rush outside to meet my best friend and, while racing down the driveway, found that our cul-de-sac mysteriously transformed so that I did not step out onto asphalt, but onto the hardwood basketball court of the Spurs Arena, where I arrived as David Robinson. Or, into the turf of Cowboy Stadium where I was Michael Irvin, and sometimes, it even became the Ballpark at Arlington where I took the mound as Nolan Ryan. Of course, I was still me – I could tell because David Robinson was never allowed to relive the final seconds of a tied basketball game over and over until he made the crucial shot, and Michael Irvin certainly couldn’t call a redo on a play when he dropped the ball. But that didn’t matter. These athletes were my heroes – and I wanted to be just like them. Little kids today still do this. I cannot count how many times I have greeted a child by name only to be corrected with, “that’s not my name, I’m Shrek/ I’m Superman/ I’m Wonder Woman/ I’m Spiderman, and recently, I’m Barack Obama”

That’s the thing with heroes. We want to be just like them, emulating them in every capacity because they are just like us, but better, or at least this is what we tell ourselves.

Reading this passage in Mark it is easy for me to also cast these four fishermen: Simon, Andrew, James and John, as heroes. Look back at the text again with me. This story begins with Jesus walking alone along the Sea of Galilee. A narrator slips into the picture to fill us in – John the Baptist has been arrested, but Jesus’ ministry has just begun and, despite the danger, he is preaching the good news that the Kingdom of God is at hand!

As he walks along, Jesus comes upon Simon and Andrew, waste deep in the water, their nets cast out before them, and invites them to join him saying, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” However, rather than staring at Jesus as if he were completely mad, these brothers immediately drop what they are doing, literally as it says they left their nets, and followed him. A short time later Jesus and his two new friends stumble upon James and John, working alongside their father and his crew in their boat, mending nets. Mark says that, upon seeing these brothers Jesus immediately extends the same invitation to them, and they react in the same manner as Simon and Andrew, dropping everything to go with Jesus and likely leaving their father and his servants open-mouthed in a state of shock.
And that’s all Mark is willing to tell us. He doesn’t fill in any other details. There is no dramatic goodbye scene between James, John and their mother, no clap on the back from dad, no gathering of provisions. Just come, and they went.

This is all wrong. How could four people drop what they were doing, leave their family and their livelihood behind, and tramp off with some guy we’re not sure they even knew. Did they know what they were getting themselves into? What was it about his call that made them drop everything and follow him?

At first glance, it’s tempting to locate these four brothers as the protagonists at the center of Mark’s story. Though they were mere fishermen, perhaps they had heard rumors of the new guy who had taken up and expanded upon the work of John the Baptist. Upon encountering him, the brothers’ pious nature and moral fortitude led them to desire only to follow this new Rabbi, so with an act of incredible courage and self-sacrifice they go, leaving everything, to follow him.

It is against their example that I am compelled to hold up a mirror to look at myself. Do I have what it takes to recognize Jesus when he calls to me, to drop everything I’m doing, to leave those I love without a goodbye and follow him? Though everything inside me, from my humble faith to my competitive nature yearns to say, “Yes! I’d do anything to serve my savior,” deep down I know that this is far from the truth. Though I desire to serve God, I come away from this story feeling like a failure, because I know I could not measure up to these great men.

But is this what this story is really about? Is Mark trying to raise up these four brothers as heroes, so that we may set them before us as examples and do as they do? Perhaps, but only if you make sure to read the rest of the book.

If we look at these characters a bit more closely a different type of light emerges around them. What do we really know about these brothers? Well, there’s Simon – who Jesus would later rename Peter. I am always grateful when Peter shows up in a story, for this is the same Peter who is the first to claim that Jesus is the messiah, the same Peter who begins to sink into the sea when he panics and loses faith after boldly striking out across the water toward Jesus, and the same Peter who would deny Jesus three times on the night of his crucifixion. Peter, thank goodness, is a screw-up. Despite his best efforts and honest faith, he can’t help the fact that he’s human. Andrew does not appear as a lead character often in Mark’s gospel so we don’t know much about him, but James and John are the very same James and John who would later ask Jesus if they might be afforded particular places of honor next to his throne. And, of these four men, not one of them could be found at the foot of the cross, alongside the women, when Jesus was crucified; they had all high-tailed it out of there. Every one of them, for better or worse, was human.

Maybe, then, if these four are not the religious heroes we originally thought, but merely people like you and me, maybe this story isn’t about them at all. Perhaps they are merely players in the greater drama that God is inviting us into here, through Mark’s gospel.
In Psalm 62, the psalmist tells us, “For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.” Perhaps there is a hint here to what was really going on, on the beach that day. We, each one of us, were made to be in relationship with God. Our hearts crave it – we can’t help it. Call it a design flaw or a stroke of genius, but we are irresistibly drawn to our creator. Unfortunately, we can’t seem to help but confuse this longing for something else – so we take this God-shaped vacuum and pour into it anything we can trying to fill it up. Yet try as we might, nothing, not money, busy-ness, power, or any other kind of distraction can fill this void. The result of our efforts is that we frequently become frustrated, jaded, sometimes even broken. But, even within the most broken or jaded among us, despite the hurt or damage you and I carry within us, there remains an awareness, deep within, that it is God alone who can fill this void. And we still deeply desire to know God. We yearn to be fully alive, to be fully who God created us to be.

This is the story of the fishermen on the beach. Mark is not telling us the story of four Super-Disciples whose own righteousness was so great that they, of their own free will, recognized and chose to follow Jesus. This story is a miracle. It is the story of God dramatically reaching into the lives of these men and claiming them to be God’s own.

It’s hard to recover from something like that. Faced with the epiphany of God, these future disciples undergo a radical shift in values and life orientation. Life does not, cannot, continue to be the same. This is not a story about human greatness. This is a story about one man, God incarnated on earth, whose love and compassion are so great that his call to follow is irresistible. It is the story of the Good News.

In Mark 1:14 Jesus says, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Like the disciples, he is not calling us to personal greatness, but to full identity. On the beach that day Jesus did not see four fishermen, but four men who longed to belong to a higher calling. And his call to them did not invite them into celebrity, but into a joyful life of service. This same call echoes across time, and extends an invitation to each of us: “Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Or, more properly according to the Greek, “Follow me, and I will make you to become fishers for people.” Jesus is not inviting them to a task, but to a vocation. Not to a job to be done daily, but to a new way of being. This is the call which is placed before us.

It is important not to misinterpret this call and drop what you’re doing to head to seminary. This is not at all what Jesus meant. Rather, in the Presbyterian Church we believe in the “priesthood of all believers,” or the idea that every Christian is called to use their gifts in the service of God, be they as a teacher, a lawyer, a mechanic, an engineer, a parent, a janitor, or even a pastor, and that all jobs are equal and necessary for the work of the kingdom. I believe that this call is to take your occupation, whatever it is, and do it as if it were your ministry.

I recently heard Mark Yaconelli tell a story about a day he spent in the mall near Christmas last year. He had been shopping all day and stopped in the food court to grab a
drink and rest for a few minutes. While sitting, he noticed a group of mentally challenged young adults come into the food court, each one escorted by a helper. One young man in particular stood out as he made a bee-line for the McDonalds. His helper went with him but, when she tried to join him in line, he pushed her away time and again, insisting that he could do this himself. Finally it was his turn at the register and when he turned around, he came away carrying a giant smile on his face and, gripped firmly between both hands, the largest cup of coffee Mark had ever seen.

He lost sight of them for a while, but caught up with the group again as he went to leave the mall. Though it had been a sunny day before, dark clouds had rolled in while they were inside and there was now a steady downpour of rain. The driver of the group went to get the van, so that not everyone would have to get wet, and quickly returned with it. Seeing the van, the young man, who still had his giant cup of coffee took off towards it and had just made it out into the rain when his helper yelled at him to come back, so that she could walk with him with an umbrella. Yet no sooner had he turned to go back to the sidewalk then the van driver yelled at him to come on, as he was already almost there. Confused, the young man turned again, but this time slipped and, as he went raised his hands to steady himself, dropped the coffee sending it splattering, along with the rain, across the pavement. He stared at it for a few minutes, then crumpled onto the ground and sat, in the coffee and the rain, crying. Seeing what was going on the other helpers began yelling at him to get up and get into the van, but he would not budge. Finally his helper, the woman who he had pushed away time and again, stepped off the sidewalk, walked over to him and sat, in the coffee and the rain, her arms enclosed around him in an act of love, and compassion.

It doesn't matter what you do or what you've done, it doesn't matter who you are. God is calling you into a life of service. We, like the disciples on the beach that day, are being invited to take on a new hero and give all of ourselves, the good and the bad, to God, trusting that through God’s grace our humble efforts will be transformed into a lasting ministry. Who knows, you may end up becoming a hero for someone else. All thanks be to God.