

Followership, Fishers of Men

Matthew 4:12-23, Isaiah 9:1-7, Psalm 27:1, 4-9

January 16, 2011

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali - to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles - the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

Matthew 4:12-23 (NIV)

This morning we are continuing along following the Revised Common Lectionary for the year. Actually, we are skipping ahead a week. This morning is actually next week's readings on the church calendar because next Sunday we are celebrating "Sanctity of Human Life" Sunday. We will be celebrating it not just by looking at the *Sanctity of Human Life* at the beginning - at the point of conception - but all the way to the end, even beyond, with such things as organ donation.

It seems like we were just celebrating Advent, and then Christmas, the birth of Jesus, and here we are this morning with Jesus beginning his adult ministry here on earth. Boy, time flies! But the gospel writers themselves didn't really spend that much time on the story of Jesus' young life. Two of them, Mark and John, don't even tell us anything about Jesus' birth and young life. They start directly with his adult ministry.

Matthew gives us Jesus' genealogy, then the birth of Jesus, the visit of the Magi when he was an infant, the escape of Mary & Joseph with their baby Jesus to Egypt to avoid his death by King Herod, and their return to Nazareth where Jesus would live his first, almost thirty years of his life in obscurity. What Jesus was like growing up, with the exception of the one account of Luke when Jesus was in the temple at the age of twelve, is anybody's guess, mere speculation.

All of the sudden, when Jesus is about 29 or 30-years-old, we have him being baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, and the Spirit of God descending upon Him like a dove, and a voice from heaven saying, “this is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Jesus’ baptism which Alex looked at last week.

Then Matthew tells us that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert where he was tempted by the devil, Satan. Of course, Jesus being Jesus, didn’t give in, so it says, “the devil left him” (Matthew 4:1-11). And then this morning we have the story of Jesus beginning his ministry here on earth.

“When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison.” Many versions use the phrase “when Jesus heard that John had been arrested,” and the Greek word used there for arrested actually means “handed over,” or “delivered up.” A sign of things to come, first for John the Baptist, whom most likely Jesus would not have any more personal contact with, before he would be “delivered up,” and then for Jesus, who would be “delivered up,” and perhaps even for his followers to come.

Fulfilling his own prophecy of *“He must become greater, I must become less”* (John 3:30). John the Baptist, the one who had come to prepare the way, would no longer be needed.

So Jesus, learning what had happened to John, knew it was time to begin his ministry, and leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, at the foot of the hills of Zebulun and Naphtali, where he would begin his ministry in the land of the Gentiles, to fulfill prophecy, that prophesied by Isaiah hundreds of years earlier.

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” “Repent” - turning from ourselves and turning to God. I really appreciated Alex’s message last Sunday. That deep down within each of us is that sense we have been created for something bigger and better. A purpose greater than ourselves.

I mentioned a couple weeks ago, on Epiphany Sunday, in my New Year’s message, that God has a “Grand Purpose” for each of our lives. And I believe that God’s “Grand Purpose” for our lives is found in Romans 8:28-29:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers (and sisters).

God’s “Grand Purpose” for all of our lives as Christians is that we be “conformed into the likeness of his Son, Jesus Christ.”

Actually God has a couple of “Grand Purposes” for our lives as Christians. First, is that we be conformed or transformed into the image of his Son, and the second we find in our passage this morning:

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Do you sense something odd in these verses? Do you sense just how much they go against our human nature? Peter and Andrew were most likely pretty accomplished fishermen. Fishing was their business, their livelihood, most likely the only lives they had ever known. And yet when Jesus called them, saying, “come, follow me,” they left everything. And then James and John, two fishermen as well, they too. “Immediately!” And to emphasize the significance of just how much they were leaving behind, Matthew tells us that James and John left their father as well. Jesus called his first disciples to “follow him,” without really telling them what it would really mean. He taught them along the way.

When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. Then a teacher of the law (a scribe) came to him and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”

Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

Another disciple said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”

But Jesus told him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.

Matthew 8:18-22 (NIV)

Then after Peter’s confession of Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” That which he would build his church upon, then he instructs his closest disciples on what following is all about:

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”

Matthew 16:24-25 (NIV)

Then we have the story of the Rich Young Ruler in Matthew 19:16-30.

Last Sunday Alex talked about our baptism being the beginning, or the starting point of our Christian journey. But for many Christians today baptism is everything. It is the beginning as well as the end. It’s kind of like saying that marriage is only about the wedding day and the exchange of vows.

Somewhere along the way we have lost the sense of following. We have become quite content with calling ourselves “Christians” with really no sense of the need to “follow Him.” While one can be a follower of Jesus Christ and not a Christian, there is nothing in Scripture that suggests

that one can be a Christian and not a follower of Jesus Christ. Mahatma Gandhi was a follower of Jesus Christ. He studied him and put into practice many of Jesus' teachings, especially those on non-violence. But Gandhi was not a Christian. In fact tradition has it that once, when asked by a close friend, "If you admire Christ so much, why don't you become a Christian?" Gandhi reportedly replied, "When I meet a Christian who is a follower of Christ, I may consider it." There is really no Christianity without followership.

When was the last time you heard a lot about "followership?" But we have heard a lot about "Leadership." Lots and lots of "Leadership seminars." In fact I have been to many of them. Lots of books on "Leadership." In fact I have read many of them. An entire section of books on "Leadership" at Barnes & Noble. But when was the last time you saw a seminar on "Followership?" Or how about an entire section at the bookstore on "How to Follow?" Most graduate schools, including most seminaries, advertise, "send us your students and we will make good leaders of them." When was the last time you saw an advertisement from one saying, "send us your students and we will make good followers of them." Yet the apostle Paul said, "follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). The truth is we don't need more leaders, we need more followers.

The truth is, we don't really need books and seminars on leading, because it is inherent in all of us. Joseph Stowell writes in his book Following Christ:

"The fact that most of us don't aspire to power and influence, or that many are introverted and like to stay in the background, does not mean that the leadership impulse is absent from our souls. It is alive and well in all of us in our desire to control our own destinies. Uninterested in positions of leadership, we are still bent on maintaining personal control over our own lives, and that is our fatal flaw (It was the fatal flaw of Adam & Eve, and all of ours ever since). The call of Christ means rejecting impulses of control, independence, and self-actualization (the exact opposite of everything our inner-self and our society tells us to aspire to). . .

By far our greatest challenge is the transfer of personal authority from ourselves to Him. Even though we call Him Christ and refer to Him as Lord, few of us want Him to be the leader unconditionally. We live with the sense that we can do a pretty good job of managing our own lives. We will listen to His advice and keep Him on hand in case of an emergency, but to transfer full authority to Him is less than appealing. Besides, how do we know Christ won't take us somewhere we don't want to go or require something we don't want to give. So we choose just to be 'normal' Christians. We will even give and serve. But our destinies will be crafted on the drawing board of our own wants and way."

A man by the name of E. Stanley Jones, a rather well known missionary to India in the first half of the 20th century wrote this of following Christ:

"Some are into self - they are determined primarily by their own self-interests. It is the driving force of their lives. To get for themselves is their compelling motive. Some are 'into the herd.' Before they act, they look around - they don't act; they only react to what the herd does.

The roots of their motives are in ‘What will people think?’ Making self, or the herd, our god, is sin, it is the chief sin.

To be ‘in Christ’ means to pull up the roots of one’s very life from the soil of sin and self and herd and plants them ‘in Christ.’ He becomes the source of everything - our life, our feeling, our acting, our being.

This obviously involves self-surrender. Not merely the surrender of our sins, our bad habits, our wrong thinking and our wrong motives, but of the very self behind all these. All of these are just symptoms; the unsundered self is the disease. So the phrase ‘in Christ’ is not only the ultimate concept, but it demands the ultimate act, self-surrender.

We say, “well, we don’t really know what God wants from us.” But the truth is we do. It’s just a matter of whether we want to surrender ourselves or not. He does have a couple of primary purposes for our lives. They’ll intertwined. One, he wants us to be conformed or transformed into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. And the second priority we find in our passage this morning. “*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men*” (Matthew 4:19). If we’re not fishing, we’re not following! Fishing for men and for women. Inviting them into the kingdom. Constantly reaching out.

First we have a compelling person, Jesus Christ, and then we have a compelling cause, fishing for others. Jesus begins his ministry here on earth by the calling of his first disciples, “come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men,” and then he ends his ministry here on earth, after his death and resurrection, just before his ascension, with what is the equivalent of the same words:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.
Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV)

The early disciples not only saw Jesus Christ as a compelling person, worthy of their full devotion, but also heeded to His call to a compelling cause. And the compelling cause is the eternal destinies of all mankind - the men, women, and children whom we come in contact with on a daily basis. And yes, it does start with our own families, but if we just leave it there, we have fallen far short of the compelling cause. In fact, Jesus was pretty clear about the need to go beyond ourselves and our own families, with words like “who is my mother, father, brother, and sister?” and “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29).

Joseph Stowell writes this about “the compelling cause” in his book *Following Christ*: “The compelling cause (of reaching out to others) is carried out against society’s preoccupation with our own needs rather than the needs of others. Just as the idea of following flies in the face of a culture bent on autonomy and self-governance, so that the thought of committing one’s life to become ‘fishers of men’ runs counter to a society addicted to self-centeredness. Following, at the very essence of its expression, is an other-directed endeavor.”

As Christians, our compelling person to follow is Jesus Christ. The compelling cause is to become better disciples ourselves, becoming more and more transformed into the image of Jesus himself, and to make disciples, teaching ourselves and others to obey everything that Jesus commanded. We can call ourselves “Christians” all we want, but if we’re not obeying, if we’re not fishing, we’re not following.

Our commitment to follow Christ does not bestow upon us instant perfection. Moving from the call to the cause takes time. Even the disciples, who had Jesus right there in front of them, struggled with their self-focused perspectives even after committing themselves to following Christ. Followership begins with a commitment to Christ as the undisputed, unconditional leader, always leading away from ourselves towards Him and others, and ending only in eternity. Ultimately it ends with the giving up of our own lives. It might not be literally, but it might be as well. Jesus’ disciples didn’t really know what “following” meant until Jesus was gone and the Holy Spirit descended upon them. None of this is possible without the Holy Spirit. But we can’t hold on to ourselves, our earthly, fleshly natures, and be filled with the Holy Spirit at the same time.

Jesus’ last words on “followership” to his disciples, just before being taken up, as recorded in the gospel of John:

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”
Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”
John 21:18-19 (NIV)

Two Fishermen (Hymn #227)

*Two fishermen, who lived along the Sea of Galilee,
stood by the shore to cast their nets into an ageless sea.
Now Jesus watched them from afar, then called them each by name.
It changed their lives, these simple men; they’d never be the same.
“Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men”*

*And as he walked along the shore ‘twas James and John he’d find,
and these two sons of Zebedee would leave their boats behind.
Their work and all they held so dear they left beside their nets.
Their names they’d heard as Jesus called; they came without regret.
“Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men”*

*O Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John beloved one,
you heard Christ’s call to speak good news revealed to God’s own Son.
Susanna, Mary, Magdalene who traveled with your Lord,
you ministered to him with joy for he is God adored.
“Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men”*

*And you, good Christians, one and all who'd follow Jesus' way,
come leave behind what keeps you bound to trappings of our day,
and listen as he calls your name to come and follow near,
for still he speaks in varied ways to those his call will hear.
"Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men"*