

“Follow Me”

Matthew 4:18-22

Richard C. Allen

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South Glastonbury

Connecticut

When Jesus said, “Follow me,” it was not in the form of a commandment. It was in the form of an invitation. Follow me.

Follow me and I will show you how you can make a difference in the world. Follow me and I will engage you in ways that will bring meaning to your life. Follow me and together we will build a faith community where justice prevails for everyone. Follow me. It’s an invitation. To this invitation, many have replied, ‘no thank you.’ But many others have said, ‘here I am; where do I sign?’ I count myself among the latter. And I’ve never regretted it.

Reading through the Gospels, we see that Jesus trained his disciples simply to offer invitations. The Holy Spirit will do the rest. The invitation sounds something like this: Come and see what God is doing. Come and drink of the living water. Come unto me all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Come away to a place apart where we can pray together. Come to the orphanage at Chezi and play with children. Come to the Cheyenne River Reservation and repair roofs and steps and floors. Come to the choir loft. Come to the blessing of animals. His words echo through the centuries. Come follow me.

When I enter a restaurant and sit at a table, I take a look at the menu. And I must confess I look as closely at the cost of the meals as I do the meals themselves. ‘What’s this going to cost me,’ is usually at the forefront of my mind. Typically, I have an amount of money in mind that I am willing to spend for my lunch. Some days I am feeling more generous than others.

Discipleship is like that menu in the restaurant in that it generates the same question: ‘what’s it going to cost me?’ What’s the cost of discipleship? What will be the cost if I choose to follow the Jesus path, the more excellent way?

What I have learned is that it may cost me some serious heartache. For, to follow the Christ is to open oneself to the pain of the world. In story after story, we see Jesus opening himself to all that hurts: to loneliness, to betrayal, to disillusionment, to failure, to various diseases. This is what it means to be a healer. Christ came to heal the wounds of the world. I take this to mean Christ chose to have a presence with anyone who is hurting. Having a presence is a giant step in the healing process. So, to accept the invitation to follow implies making ourselves present to the suffering around us. This, inevitably, leads to serious heartache. It also leads to the kind of healing our world desperately needs today.

In 1973, we witnessed the dramatic takeover of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, down on the Pine Ridge Reservation; and the birth of the American Indian Movement. On the 100th anniversary of the Wounded Knee Massacre, native people took a stand for justice. Throughout the state, tensions rose and skirmishes took place and everyone felt on edge. The Council of Churches called for ministers to be trained in how to offer a peaceful presence. I signed up; got the training; and was deployed to the Second Annual International Treaty Conference to be a peaceful presence. I remember sitting on the ground among Russell Means and various representatives of indigenous groups from many countries. I listened to many painful stories. There was nothing I could do to change the history, but I could offer a peaceful presence in that moment. My presence there was just a drop in the bucket. I don’t know that it mattered much in the long run. But I do believe that following in the way of Jesus Christ means looking for ways to be present where humanity is suffering. There is a cost to this. I call it heartache.

Balancing this cost, there is an equally powerful joy. It has to do with realizing your life has a sacred purpose, a profound meaning. When Jesus invited those first fishermen to follow him, he was inviting them to find the deeper meaning of life. He was inviting them to move beyond happiness, which is here today and gone tomorrow, to the more sustaining joy that comes when we see that our lives do matter, that our lives are making somebody else's burden a little bit lighter, a little bit more manageable.

In a way, this is how I would characterize the whole mission thrust of our church; to use our resources: our time and our talent and our treasure to lighten someone's burden, to carry someone's load, to share someone's sorrow, to alleviate someone's hunger, to address someone's injustice, to include someone previously excluded. By following the Christ in this way, we experience what we call in the United Church of Christ the 'joy of discipleship.'

As we baptize children into the Faith; as we receive new members into the covenant; it is as if we are all receiving the Jesus invitation again for the first time: "Follow me." Have a presence where there is suffering. Know the joy of making a difference. "Follow me." In the greatest of hope, Amen!