

“Follow Me”

Matthew 4:12-23

Richard C. Allen

January 22, 2017

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

I've always been intrigued by Matthew's depiction of the calling of the first disciples. Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee. He sees some fishermen. He calls out to them, "Follow me." And they leave their nets to follow him. Simple as that! Matthew's account always leaves me wondering how the fishermen could have just walked away from their business. Did they already know who Jesus was? Were they tired of fishing? We aren't told any of the details a modern novelist would surely have provided.

So, I've been reflecting on this two-word invitation, "Follow me." I've been getting in touch with what it's meant to me to accept the invitation. I'd like to share this reflection with you this morning.

I have come to believe that Jesus knew he was headed into some dark territory; some places of real despair; some places of unbearable grief; some places where life was raw. I believe he understood himself to be a light for that darkness, and that his disciples would walk with him no matter how dark the darkness became. So, for me, to follow means to be willing to step into another person's darkness bringing whatever form of light seems appropriate. This is one way of understanding the mission of a local church. Together, we wade into the deep waters, into the troubled waters, to be a bridge over those troubled waters.

In about 1984, the AIDS epidemic reached our small, dairy town in Wisconsin. We heard that Mark, one of our local police officers, had been infected and was in the hospital. This caused quite a panic on the hospital staff.

The husbands of the nurses were refusing to allow their wives to come to work for fear they might catch what was draining life from Mark's body. Mark wasn't a member of our church, but he was a human being, made in the image of God. Plus, he was just a super nice man. I remember walking into the darkness of his hospital room. A plastic cage encompassed his bed. Tubes and bandages and other medical paraphernalia wound their way around his face and limbs. Two plastic sleeves allowed a visitor to reach in and touch him. So I did that. I touched Mark's forehead and his fingers through the plastic. We made eye contact. I whispered a prayer. A week later, I conducted his funeral.

Reflecting on that time in the hospital, I see that my role had been to follow Jesus into the darkness of AIDS, into the darkness of an unbearable loneliness. His family had abandoned him. His friends wanted nothing more to do with him. My time with Mark helped me to understand what it means to follow, what it means to offer a non-anxious presence. Jesus said to Peter and Andrew, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Mark helped me to understand what this means: to be a bearer of light where there is darkness of any kind.

Jesus said, "Follow me." As I reflect further on this invitation, I see that Jesus realized there were too many people living outside of the warmth of a caring community. He wanted to assemble a team of disciples who would do the work of welcoming the outsider, welcoming the leper, welcoming the ones who had been labeled 'unacceptable' for whatever reason. He watched the fishermen gathering in fish, fish of every imaginable species: tilapia and small mouth bass and salmon and cat fish and perch and blue gills. It occurred to him that these people so skilled in gathering fish could be just as effective in gathering people, all kinds of people: people of every race, every sexual orientation, every economic level, every state of mental health.

It would be like realizing that a public school playground supervisor could transfer her skill sets to organizing a march on Washington. If Peter and Andrew could gather in fish, they could just as well be gathering in the disenfranchised of the world. When Jesus said, "Follow me," he was really inviting us to be the inviters!

You've heard me tell about my mother sitting out on her front porch at 57 Western Avenue. She'd wave to every passerby. And if she didn't recognize the one strolling by she'd call out to that person, "Excuse me! We haven't met yet! Come in for some lemonade!" She became known as the hostess of Western Avenue! Students from Westfield State College and joggers from Franklin Avenue and even lovers walking hand-in-hand all heard and responded to her invitation. She was a gatherer of people. I don't think she ever touched a fishing pole or baited a hook or cast a net, but she "got it" when it came to inviting the world into the warmth of her hospitality. "Follow me," Jesus said. The implication being: together, we'll welcome the world into the warmth of our love; we'll welcome the ones who are hardest to love! We won't ask to see their report card or their passport or their birth certificate. We'll just welcome them.

Jesus said, "Follow me." As I reflect even further on this invitation, I see that Jesus had a long range perspective. I suspect he knew his life would be relatively brief, and that he'd need a core group to carry on the ministry he was initiating. Thus, I would say he anticipated something like the church forming and embodying his teachings. So, for me, to follow Jesus is to be a student of his teaching, of his wisdom, of his message. The Christian faith is always one generation away from extinction. So, I feel compelled to be both a student and a teacher of his message.

People often ask whether the stories of Jesus in the Bible are true. What they mean is: did they really happen? Did he walk on water?

Did he change water into wine? Did he feed 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish? My understanding is that the stories may or may not be factual; they may or may not be historical. But they all contain an important truth which must not be lost to humanity. The stories of Jesus all carry truths we can not afford to live without.

When he invited Peter and Andrew to leave their nets and to follow him, I believe he meant for them to take in everything he had to teach them about loving the neighbor, about forgiving each other, about being a light in the world. I believe he offered the invitation with the long range view in mind, that his message of salvation would matter for years to come and even forever.

So, this morning, I just invite us to place ourselves in the boots or the sandals of the fishermen, of Peter and Andrew; and to imagine hearing Jesus calling out to us, "Follow me." It is in the hearing of this invitation that we remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.