

Epiphany III – Following Me
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Mark 1:14-20

What does it mean to follow Jesus? What does it entail for us to answer the voice calling across the shores of life, inviting us to walk alongside him? What does it mean to follow Jesus?

When I was a little girl growing up in Orlando, FL, following Jesus meant going to church and Sunday school each week, as well as choir practice after Wednesday night dinners. It meant prayers before meals and at bedtime. It included learning Bible stories, singing hymns, and resting in a community of love, comfort, and friendship. Following Jesus meant living the message that God is love, which translated into being kind to others and offering help to the less fortunate. Church attendance, community membership, and exemplar behavior all mingled together to form a model of following Christ.

As I matured into adulthood, following Jesus morphed beyond church, community, and kindness into tackling the “big” issues of the day. The insularity of my childhood was replaced by an external focus on changing the world. Here the urgency of inequality, racism, sexism, poverty, and global suffering caused by war, famine, and disease cried out to be addressed. After all, Jesus ate with sinners, healed the sick, called children to his side, and made women part of his leadership team. It stands to reason that following Jesus meant protesting injustice, opening a job clinic, showing up at rallies, or traveling across the globe as a medical missionary. It entailed linking a gospel of love and a Lord of life to the problems of today. While the first model might be criticized as too comfortable, the second could be critiqued as being too dependent upon human effort rather than the working of the Spirit. Both offer something to any reflection about how Jesus makes a call upon our lives.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? Mark, the earliest gospel writer, proclaims that following Jesus involves a decisive moment of complete surrender. Four fishermen are laboring at the Sea of Galilee, casting nets into the water when Jesus calls out to them, inviting them into a new vocation. Mark does not tell us whether they have encountered the Son of God before this moment. Mark does not drop many clues about these new disciples’ ages, marital status, education or life goals. Instead Mark offers a short, compelling, action-oriented scene: fishing. Jesus’s appearance. Invitation. Response. Follow me. And so they did.

Peter is the first. He will become the unofficial leader of the group, the one who confesses “Jesus, you are the Messiah,” and later deserting Jesus on the night of his arrest. Peter serves as the rock upon which the church is built and also a symbol of our failures to live up to Christ’s call.

Andrew, Peter’s brother, is the one about whom we know the least. He appears to exist in Peter’s shadow. His cameo speaking role coming when he tells Jesus there is a boy in this crowd

of five thousand who has two fish and five loaves of bread. But Andrew will sail the world to spread the gospel and, like Peter, be martyred for his faith.

James and John are fishing alongside their father with a business large enough to employ hired hands when Jesus appears. Together with Andrew and Peter, they form Jesus's inner circle. These four will be the ones who go up the mountain with Jesus at the Transfiguration, whom Jesus will ask to pray with him in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before his death. James's evangelistic efforts will reach all the way to Spain. His martyrdom is recorded in the book of Acts.

John is presumed to be James's younger brother. He too is present for the healings, casting out of demons, and the sermons about God's kingdom. He also has his failings, joining James in asking Jesus if the two brothers can be granted prime seats at Jesus's right and left side in eternity. John appears to be the only one who reaches old age to die of natural causes.

None of them could have known what lay ahead when Jesus appeared at the shoreline. At that moment they had just an appearance and an invitation upon which to make their response. It looks like Jesus simply appears, a stranger amongst them, whose voice or presence is compelling enough for them to follow. Some scholars question a storyline in which Jesus is the calling stranger, remarking not only how unlikely it is for someone to leave their lives to follow an unfamiliar figure but also how unlike Jesus it is to not invest the time in forming a relationship. Irene Martin argues that Jesus surely worked to gain their trust by taking part in their daily living.¹ Jesus shared their life as a way to invite them into his. Recently I participated in a webinar that suggested the crises of today are best met by relational organizing, a determined effort to form bonds with one another in effort toward common good. Relational organizing would be Jesus's calling card.

How does one follow Jesus? The first step is to recognize the relational invitation, to know that our intense questions about identity – Who am I? What am I here for? Who walks beside me? – are met and shared by Jesus who appears to us with all the fullness of God's presence.

From such a building block, Peter, Andrew, James, and John answer Jesus's invitation. Two characteristics define their response. First, they answer decisively. They make a bold, determined choice. After Jesus says "Follow Me," they do not debate the pros and cons of his invitation. They do not listen to a prolonged sales pitch or take his words home to deliberate over dinner. They immediately lay down their nets. Mark places great emphasis upon this word immediately. There is an urgency to Jesus, whose presence overturns the world and demands a decisive choosing by anyone who receives him.

We live in a time when commitment-making is declining. We see this in memberships of every variety. Even as a pastor, I find myself making apologies when asking persons to join a group or

¹ Martin, Irene, *Sea Fire: Tales of Jesus and Fishing*, Found in *Gospelled Lives: Encounters with Jesus* by John Indermark (Nashville: Upper Rooms, 2008), 20.

committee. I say, “I’m not asking for a lot from you. This won’t take too much time.” Yet isn’t the gospel’s power found in the reality that this choice toward Jesus demands much of you? Following Jesus only happens by a commitment. Like any lifelong commitment, the choice to follow needs to be renewed, affirmed, re-engaged again and again. The first disciples of Jesus mold making a decisive commitment to follow.

The second characteristic of their response to Jesus’ invitation comes in the completeness of their actions, the totality of their choice toward Christ. These four persons leave behind homes, families, and livelihoods for a new vocation as sharers in Jesus’s ministry. They act in ways that have an economic impact, as well as a social one. Virtually every aspect of their lives is altered. We witness their behavior and respond, “I can’t abandon my job. I will not leave my family or my home. And moreover, I don’t believe God is requiring me to do so.”

The message of this call story, I believe, is not to make us defensive about the things we can or should not forgo. Instead the story beckons us to see discipleship as a vocation whose impact will influence every other aspect of our lives. As Ted Smith says, “Jesus is not asking these new followers to add one more task to their busy lives. He calls them into a new way of being.”² In this new way of being, questions such as “How do I spend my time?” “How do I prioritize my finances?” or “Where do I invest my talents, my energy, my gifts?” “Who are my friends and how am I living in community with the least of these my brothers and sisters?” get answered in light of Jesus’s claim upon our lives. We do not get to pick and choose what aspects of our lives Jesus can shape. Instead we are asked to have Jesus shape every aspect of who we are and how we live.

When we follow Jesus, he promises us that we will become fishers of people. Fishers of people. The meaning of such fishing is simple, says Sam Wells, you bring others into the company of Jesus.³ You cast a line that leads others into the net of God’s love.

One of the gifts of my childhood vision of following Jesus was the privilege of being a part of a community of faith, being embraced by others who claimed me as God’s child and therefore their child. It is not an exaggeration for me to say that I don’t believe I would be all of who I am today without that claiming community. When Jesus says the kingdom has come near, he means God has come, invaded our space, making all of us children of God and siblings to one another. Followers of Jesus live that love in the daily choices of their lives.

One of the gifts of that second version of following Jesus was a passion for hurting world, an urgency about meeting the needs of hungry, forgotten, lonely, and excluded. When you follow Jesus you are not content with the world remaining as broken as it is. You cannot hold the net of God’s love only for yourself, you are compelled to throw it out for others. In the weeks since

² Smith, Ted, “Homiletical Perspective on Mark 1:14-20” in *Feasting on the Word Year B Vol 1*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 287.

³ Wells, Sam, “Keep It Simple” Sermon preached at St. Martins in the Fields, London, Epiphany III, 2015. <https://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org>.

the attack on the U.S. Capitol, I have been struggling to absorb the event, thinking deeply about our role as a church community living in the larger world today. Deep harm was done that day. Into that harm, you and I have an obligation to model what it looks like to follow Jesus. Each of us will do us in our particular way, out of our God-given gifts. But these common themes found in this calling story will unite us. Jesus calls us by relationship and into relationship, Jesus's call demands a response from us that is ongoing. It is a lifelong vocation rather than a set of tasks we can check off and set aside. Jesus entrusts us with the privilege of casting a wide new of love into which others can discover a life-giving God. How is it that you are following him?