

## “Follow Me”

January 24, 2021

*Good News for a New Year* series – livestream

Some of you know that I served for some time on the Board of Ordained Ministry. It's the body in our conference that credentials pastors. One of the questions that people had to answer when they came before the board is connected to the Scripture today. This was the question: *What are the nets you have to drop in order to follow Jesus more fully?* I didn't have to answer that question when I went before the board, but I think about that question a lot. I invite us to see a video that asks us the same question. This is called “Leave: Follow.” **SHOW MEDIA:** *What will you leave to follow?*

This video is a challenge. We may watch it and wonder why we have to leave behind activities that are seemingly good, necessary, healthy, and life-giving. We all need time to do things that bring us joy, and we're called to do that. Perhaps the challenge is to consider the place of all of those things. Are we focused and committed first to Jesus - the One whom we call *Lord*?

Perhaps you feel the tension of Jesus' call to follow. Following him seems easy enough, at least that what it seems like in Mark's Gospel – Jesus calls, and they drop their nets and go. But what I appreciate most is that question at the end: *What will you leave to follow?* What are the sacrifices we make to follow Jesus every day? How is life different because we follow him? How is our rhythm of worship and work and play affected because we want to be disciples? How do we fight against the temptations of idolatry – worshiping money or stuff or people rather than worshiping God? How do we stand against injustice and participate in God's Kingdom where justice and peace meet? How do we check ourselves about whom we follow – and why?

Now Jesus is on the move in Mark's Gospel. Mark tells it as if he's running out of breath. Everything happens quickly. Jesus is baptized by John, then spends 40 days in the wilderness where he's helped by angels even as he's tempted by Satan. By the way, John is arrested, so that can't be good for Jesus, but more on that later (you know how it all turns out).

Then Jesus goes into Galilee sharing good news. Galilee is mostly Gentile territory – making it clear that he comes for everyone. And here's what he says: the appointed time of God has come; the Kingdom of God is at hand. And then he calls the people to repent – to turn around, to change their minds – and believe in that good news. It's a special moment in time – *kairos* is the Greek word, not

*chronos* like chronology. It's not just like time on a clock, but something new is happening! God is breaking into the world in a new way – in Jesus!

So he starts to build his team. And in light of how we use the word *follow* these days, here's a funny image. **SHOW SLIDE:** You have 12 followers. It's a wonder what Jesus would do on social media – maybe posting Bernie Sanders memes with the rest of the world? I'm not sure.

Back to that question – what do we leave in order to follow Jesus? Following Jesus doesn't mean we can't enjoy our lives, but it does mean that following Jesus requires something of us. For these men whom Jesus meets on the seaside, it meant giving up their livelihood (or at least devoting less time to it) and giving up what was familiar. It meant big-time change, and I'm sure some people around them thought they were absolutely not thinking straight.

Following Jesus put them into community with Jesus and each other – and then drove them into relationships with all kinds of people – even people they may never have thought about knowing. For us, following Jesus puts us in community and connection with people we wouldn't otherwise know or have any relationship with. That's a part of the challenge and call – to be the Body of Christ, to love God and love neighbor together.

Mark's Gospel gets right to the point and offers just the facts. We don't get a lot of details, which is hard when we come to a story like this. It's one of those times when I'm sure there's some dialogue missing. Don't you wonder if there was a little more conversation between Jesus and these fishermen?

We're not sure if they had seen Jesus or talked to him before, but perhaps they had a connection with John the Baptist. All we know is that Jesus passes by as they're doing their jobs and says, "Follow me," and they drop everything and follow him.

Now one thing to know is that Mark writes with a level of urgency that we don't have anymore (or at least not as much). When he records the Gospel, people are waiting for Jesus to return – and soon – very soon. There is no time to waste. There is no time to wait. *Follow me* – and they do! Some of them even receive a new name – Simon becomes Peter. Here's another nod to what it means to follow Jesus – our plans usually change. **SHOW SLIDE:** Simon Peter's business cards

Our plans change many times when we follow Jesus – or at least what we had planned changes. Some of you know my call story. I'm convinced it started a long time ago, but I had every intention of going into education – of being a

teacher of foreign languages, and that changed when I was in college. But that changed when I felt God calling me into pastoral ministry.

Jesus' approach to building a team for ministry reminds us that he calls – and then equips those he calls. He doesn't wait for people to come to him, which was the usual way for a rabbi and disciple relationship to begin. He doesn't offer them a theological treatise to digest. Jesus goes out and calls people – regular people. One historian records that there were hundreds of fishing boats on the water at one time. Fishing was a lucrative endeavor – and very hard work. These are busy business owners fishing on the Sea of Galilee, who know what it means to fish all night and mend nets and sell fish all day, who have calloused hands and aching backs from physical labor.

Jesus calls these fishermen to a different kind of work. He calls them to more than believing in him; he calls them to action. Notice that he doesn't say "believe in me," but "follow me." Following him means watching and learning – and doing! They aren't engaged in theological study or training. They aren't being groomed to lead others in religious studies. They follow Jesus and share in his life and ministry. They will learn as they go, and isn't that the truth? They will not be spectators, but Jesus says that they will fish for people. They will widen the net and embrace God's people.

They will follow him amid crowds who gather to hear him teach and preach a message of redemption and hope for all people. They will follow him into the homes of those who are sick and dying and watch him heal. They will follow him to touch those who are considered untouchable, those who are thought to be forever ostracized, those who are pushed away and ignored – and they will watch him restore people to community. And he will give them the gifts to do that same work.

With Jesus, following him, they will see good news and the nearness of the kingdom. They will not just watch, but will be active and engaged in what he is doing to bring God's Kingdom into reality.

The other interesting thing in his story is that the call from God can come in a day's work. The words of Jesus – *Follow me* – can come when we're doing other important things. Those words can guide us into ministry. I heard that message as I read more about Lori Marie Key this week. **SHOW SLIDE:** Key singing at memorial

Maybe you know her name – or maybe you heard her sing. Key is a registered nurse who works at St. Mary Mercy Hospital in Livonia. She worked on a surgical-turned-Covid floor for much of the last year, but it was a video of her

singing “Amazing Grace” in the hospital that went viral last April – so much that she was invited to sing this week at a memorial service to remember those who have died during this pandemic.

The backstory behind Key singing is important. It was a colleague who asked her to sing that day in the hospital – sing while doing her job - and so she did. It was a comfort to her co-workers and to those whom they were caring for on the floor. Key shared that she and others working in many healthcare settings have cared for patients who were in isolation in their last days and even connecting their loved ones over the phone.

Key said, "I'm singing for families that have lost their loved ones to COVID...I'm singing so they know—even though that was a hard time and may still be a hard time—God's grace is sufficient...'Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound.'...don't get into the negative mindset, stay optimistic, and that energy is going to help heal. I felt like that could help heal families..."

Key’s ministry of music and her words challenged me to remember what it means to follow Jesus. She offered a song, comfort, and a witness to God’s grace in a moment when it was desperately needed. Key’s colleague asked her to sing because she had sung in her Baptist church. Key’s faith showed through in her daily life.

We need to pay attention to our spiritual lives – to keep learning and growing in our faith through study, prayer, and community. But Jesus also calls these fishermen to look around – to adopt an outward focus and make connections with others. Key’s willingness to sing and share her faith impacted her co-workers, those she cares for, and people around the world. If you watch on Tuesday night, it truly was a ministry of music.

We have connections. We have influence. We have opportunities to offer support and encouragement to others where we are – at home, at work, in organizations we belong to, at school, in leadership roles we have, in ways we serve, in all of our relationships. Fishing for people isn’t a contest, but a call to active engagement with others, showing God’s love and acceptance, and offering hospitality so that God can do the work of transformation.

This season after Epiphany is about living in the light of God’s love. We sometimes try to limit God’s work in our own lives, but Jesus calls us to follow every day from wherever we are. Maybe what we leave behind to follow Jesus is the worry and apprehension when it comes to sharing Good News. Maybe we leave behind control and predictability – or make a change in our routine or

priorities. Maybe we leave behind our own insecurity about knowing enough or being good enough or loving Jesus enough.

Jesus calling disciples reminds us that we are a part of God's Kingdom work right now. And even though we've lost some of Mark's urgency, there's no time to wait – and no time to waste. That's still true. God needs us to share Good News.

Good News literally means “news that brings joy” – a good message. Jesus announced that he was the good news – that God was doing something new in him. And I wonder if we focus on news that brings joy, we might find those opportunities to share with others more often. Maybe you're not a nurse who sings, but you're a person who prays and can offer that gift of compassion and care to others. I've seen the power of prayer work mightily this week in our congregation and community.

Maybe you have resources to share with someone who is need. You can cook a meal, knit a hat or scarf, serve in a ministry, teach others how to do something that helps them and then helps others. You have knowledge and skills that can benefit others and even reach out into the community.

What will you leave behind to follow? We are called to follow Jesus – to be ourselves where we are and remember whom we follow – and to work to build God's Kingdom. We're invited to move with Jesus on the way - asking, learning, listening, and doing as we go.

Friends, this is a call story – and an opportunity for all of us to re-engage, re-focus, re-commit – to follow where Jesus leads in faith and trust. It is daunting some days, and some days it's full of joy. But we know we don't do it alone. We follow the One who walks before us and beside us. That's a gift.

I pray that all of us would hear that call to active engagement, to offer hospitality, to offer space, to share the gifts we have – because we have them. And when we share them, we give God glory.

Thanks be to God. Amen. Let us pray...