

Called to Follow

By
The Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 62:5-12

⁵For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. ⁶He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. ⁷On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. ⁸Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. Selah ⁹Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath. ¹⁰Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them. ¹¹Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, ¹²and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

I am the one in our family who likes to plan the trips. I get input from Larry and our sons, when they're going with us, about what everyone wants to see and to do, but I like to arrange the details. I grew up in a family that crisscrossed the country and Canada in a station wagon, often staying in National Parks, learning about Native American cultures, rock formations, botanical gardens, art and dinosaur footprints. As a child I learned to enjoy reading good old-fashioned paper maps, and to meander the scenic routes rather than fly down the highway. Admittedly it's probably a control thing – on my part, but I like to plan the itinerary. I always build in room for spontaneity – there's nothing like planned spontaneity! And to the chagrin of my family I enjoy talking to strangers. You never know where a good conversation with a local might lead you. Through the years I have acquired a travel-worthy wardrobe of wrinkle resistant, quick dry clothes and can pack two weeks' worth in a compact carry-on. As far as I am concerned half the fun of a trip is the planning, getting ready, having a good idea of where I am going and what I'm going to see.

So I am quite sure I would have spent considerably more time choosing what to pack for a weekend trip than any of those fishermen spent deciding whether or not to follow Jesus. How could Simon and Andrew, James and John make a decision about being a disciple of Jesus so quickly and with so little information? Wouldn't we have asked a few questions? O.K., Jesus, let's assume for the sake of argument that I want to follow you – where are you going? Exactly how long will it take? Where will we be staying along the way? If this caravan of invitees keeps getting bigger, where will we stop and eat? I have studied this passage of scripture dozens of times, and I'm always surprised that according to Mark these four followers ask nothing of Jesus. They left their nets; two of them left their father behind in the boat wondering about the future of the family fishing business. Jesus called and they followed – simple as that.

But - when you go back to the text scratching your head over the immediacy of their response, you see again the opening announcement:

... after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near... They had at least some time to prepare because everyone knew John. John had done what he was meant to do. During the First Century, people lived in constant fear under military occupation. Political leaders were corrupt and mowed down anything that got in the way of their pursuit of power and wealth. There was a pervasive fear of foreigners, a rigid hierarchy and social structure; even the religious institutions were co-opted into systems of vying for power and resources. In other words, it was not unlike our time. John read the signs of the times, and pointed out to those who were seeking a better tomorrow, that God was coming over the horizon in the person of Jesus. So, when we wonder about those first disciples following Jesus, no questions asked, because of John they may have been living with a heightened expectation, on the lookout for someone who spoke with the authority and authenticity of God.

Perhaps John prepared them, as he is meant to prepare us, for urgent anticipation of Jesus. The gospel writer Mark is not really interested in telling why they followed, and doesn't care to imagine interior motives or feelings. He is writing the very first gospel and trying to do just one thing: tell the story of Jesus in as urgent and dramatic a fashion as possible. He uses the word *immediately* over and over again because he is in one big hurry to tell us about Jesus. What Mark cares about most is - giving us the essential life story of Jesus, so that we who would later read what he wrote down, would also turn toward him and follow; to be inspired to go after the life Jesus offers, to extend his compassionate, healing grace, to affirm his authority as God on earth, and to trust his power to raise us to new life. That's a lot to contemplate when your feet hit the floor in the morning, to consider this vital, life-giving invitation which calls for our daily response, and which encourages us to invite others to join along.

The Call to Follow feels particularly urgent these days. Part of that urgency, of course, is the reality of what is happening in the realm of

American religiosity. It's been twenty years since sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell wrote *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* and launched a contemporary reckoning with the decline of mainline Christianity. They showed that the 1950's was a boom time for American religiosity because, following World War Two, faith represented – in large part – patriotism during the Cold War against atheistic communism. The countercultural movements of the 1960's began questioning every aspect of institutional life and religious practice began to wane. After the free-for-all 60's, there was a backlash in the 1970's and 80's when the so-called Moral Majority began to define new political fault lines in terms of religious observance. The 1990's found more cultural acceptance in people having no religious affiliation, and the biggest drop off in religious affiliation became the children of Baby Boomers.¹

I share the concern many of you have who raised your children in the church and find them now disengaged from any religious affiliation. I did not get very far when I was talking to our son James about this one time. He said, “Mom, as your child I spent more days in church by the time I was eighteen than most people do in a lifetime.” I think he feels sufficiently church-ed. Many of our children who were raised in the faith may not be attending church any more, although they have Christian values. And they appreciate the church as a community of mutual support, compassion and service.

The good news for us at Bryn Mawr is as a congregation we continue to attract new members, particularly young families. The quality of our children and youth ministries will continue to help our corporate response to Jesus' Call; however the vitality of large programmatic churches like ours, is not a shared reality. A new sociological study *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society* shows that in the United States somewhere between six thousand and ten thousand churches close every year. Their sacred spaces are being repurposed into apartments,

¹ Jessica Grose, series of *New York Times* articles, April - November, 2023.

laundries, laser-tag arenas, skate parks, pubs and the like, or they are simply demolished.²

As we grieve this reality, let's also remember one key aspect of this formative gospel text. Jesus never said, Follow me to church. He said, *Follow me. Follow me and I will make you fish for people.* Is it possible that in these decades of decline in Mainline Christianity we've mistakenly equated discipleship with adherence to our understanding of religious experience as church attendance? Have the evangelism gurus of the last couple of decades been slightly off the mark with their presumed keys to successful church growth: adequate parking, a clear mission statement, and a small group experience for all adherents? All of these are good things, but maybe not the most important thing.

In this season of Mainline decline, Theologian John Sobrino, has challenged the church to be more experiential in our evangelism. When people come into the church, the theologian writes, they are often asked, Do you believe in Jesus Christ? That doesn't cost much. It has to do with whether I am able to give mental assent to the church's treasured propositions about the second person of the Trinity. I can do this with a nod, almost a wink. But when someone says, 'Are you following Jesus?' This involves my lifestyle, my values, my priorities, my surrender". Then he goes on to say something that resonates deeply with this Call to Follow: "Belief statements about Christ, can accompany an experience of Jesus, or they can follow an experience of Jesus, but they cannot replace an experience of Jesus."³

What I think he means by that is the only way to experience Jesus is not to believe in him, or to trust in him, but to follow him. Jesus calls us forth from the old accustomed ways of doing what we do into his radical new ways of living in the world. Jesus said: Follow me, you fishermen, and I will make you fish for people. As if to say - I will use the skills

² *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society.*

³ Susan Garrett, "Disciples on Trial," *Christian Century*, April 15, 1998, p. 396 ff.

you already have, but I will change your life's direction. Follow me into the difficult places of human community where the sick yearn for healing, Where broken relationships yearn for forgiveness and repair, where the hungry need food, the homeless need shelter, the suffering need companionship, the lost to be restored to community again, the vulnerable, the old and the young, need care.

It is good that we come together in this sacred space to offer God our worship and our praise, but we must remember that coming to church does not equal following Jesus. Because we can never follow Jesus “in general.” There are many distinct ways to imitate him by treating others with the same regard, through love and patience; paying attention to those overlooked or derided; embracing the ones he embraced with inclusive love, compassion and service. This afternoon, tomorrow, the next day, can we make it our practice to ask ourselves: where am I following Jesus in this moment? How might I invite another along with me.

At the end of the day we may not be better disciples, but if we consciously live into the experience of walking with him, we might be more hopeful people. We might just see God’s kingdom drawing near. Friends, we have in our collective memory this bright shining moment on the beach when Jesus called, and they dropped everything and followed to fish for people, for people like us. If the likes of us have gotten caught up in his net, just imagine what we might do to live out the good news of the gospel.

AMEN.