

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

"FOLLOW ME" John 21:1-19

We tend to associate the invitation to "follow me" with our Lord Jesus Christ. Did you know that it is really a call that is consistently given to God's people throughout Scripture? When God first spoke to Abram, he told him to leave his father and his land in order that he might go to the place where God would lead him (Genesis 12:1). The people of Israel followed God out of Egypt and into the wilderness (Exodus 13:21-22). The Lord led the people into the Promised Land (Joshua 3:10-11). And it was symbolic of Israel's refusal to follow God that they demanded from Samuel a king like all the other lands instead of having God as their king (1 Samuel 8:7). So the good and the bad in the history of Israel are associated with the command to "follow me."

This is also the theme that brackets Jesus' entire earthly ministry. He calls his first disciples with the simple invitation to "follow me" (Matthew 4:18) and Jesus' last instruction in John's Gospel was again, "follow me" (John 21:19).

As we delve into this phrase as our theme for 2010 at St. Matthew's, we realize that we are joining the tradition of God's people that spans some four or more millennia. "Follow me" was the call to the first disciples, and it has ever been the call to all who profess a belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

We are followers. As a child, I used to play "follow-the-leader" and "Simon-sez." Success in both games was based on how well one could follow the one who was calling the "shots." As a student and an athlete, I learned through obedient imitation of those who were in authority. As an adult, I live and prosper by adhering to models of behavior provided by my personal heroes and mentors. And as I follow, others will follow me. It is how we are wired as human beings, for God created us to follow him.

Just as following is characteristic of both the most trivial games of our childhood and the weightiest pursuits of our vocations, Jesus' invitation to "follow me" has universal application in the life of the believer. The comprehensive nature of this call is seen in our lesson from St. John. To follow Jesus presents both little challenges and big ones. St. Peter and the disciples return to their "default mode" after the death of Jesus. They go home to familiar waters and back to fishing. These guys are professionals – they know the Sea of Galilee and they know fish. Yet, as every fisherman at every skill level knows, sometime you simply fail to catch fish. This went on for the entire night. In the morning some guy on land says throw the net on the other side of the boat. Now, we are not talking about a cruise ship that is several football fields wide. A Galilean fishing boat was only about 8 feet wide. You can imagine a bunch of fishermen thinking, "Mister, are you out of your mind? Oh, what the heck, we might as well give it a try." No wonder St. Peter's response to the amazing catch was to declare that the guy on the beach was his Lord. It was a little thing to follow Jesus in throwing the net to the other side, but it was rewarded with huge dividends.

Once on land, St. Peter was presented with another command to “follow me” from Jesus. This time it was no little challenge but a big one. The challenge was to love Jesus and God’s people more than the fish. In other words, Jesus was telling St. Peter that he was to give up his identity as a fisherman and do the work he had seen Jesus doing. The lesson we learn through the disciples is that if you can trust Jesus with the little challenges, you can be assured that he can be trusted with the big ones. Jesus himself said, *“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much...”* (Luke 16:10a, NIV).

Jesus meets us in our little lives (the mundane – the fishermen fish!) so that he can lead us into the greater life of the kingdom. In our lives, we till the land for a meager harvest, but it is God who causes the growth (1 Corinthians 3:7). However, God would lead us into a greater and eternal harvest for his kingdom. The fishermen caught nothing although they toiled all night. Yet when Jesus told them to throw the net an insignificant distance away, they caught 153 fish (John 21:11). As Jesus said elsewhere, the field is white with the harvest (Matthew 9:37). But we must follow God into the field and harvest as he instructs us.

In this reading, the command to “follow me” goes beyond the little and the big challenges and into the huge. Jesus told St. Peter:

^{17c}“Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me” (John 21:17c-19).

Jesus’ ultimate call to St. Peter and to all who believe in him is to follow him to the cross – to come and die. “Follow me” means first to do as I say. That is, give up your way for my way, your will for my will. Second, “follow me” means to do as I have done. As Jesus gave up his life for us, we are to do likewise for others. The call is to die to yourself and live to Christ.

But how are we to follow Jesus there? According to St. Paul, the answer is baptism.

³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:3-11).

It is not the water, the words or the works that are of ultimate importance in baptism; it is the transforming power of his Spirit working in you to become like Jesus.

We are like trees in the forest destined to be valuable furnishings in the throne room of God. Like the trees, we have a natural function (shade, dwelling place, even produce O₂ for breathing). These are our earthly functions. But our ultimate use extends beyond what we can naturally do in a lifetime and while our natural function is affected by our environment, our eternal function is only dependent on the loving steadfast hand of God. Like the tree that will become a fine piece of furniture that will outlast the tree's natural life, our transformation takes a death. The tree is selected, cut down, sawn into boards, dried and only then can it be used according to the will of the master carpenter to make furnishings for the kingdom.

Our baptism symbolizes our yielding to the Master Carpenter; to be cut down and refashioned into a being of eternal value. The time between our baptism and our grave is the period of our transformation. It is the period when our natural selves are transformed into a more perfect image of Christ.

We are not left to guess what we are to do. Jesus has shown us. The Master Carpenter himself was nailed to the tree and cut down, seasoned in the grave, raised as a new and eternal incarnation of God, and taken up into the throne room of heaven for ever. That is the glorious path he has traveled before us, and it is the way to which he calls us when he says, "Follow me."

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, [you call us to follow you, and] you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen. (mod. fr. BCP. P. 101)

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on April 18, 2010, the Third Sunday of Easter.