**Following Jesus**

A sermon by The Rev. Chris Wendell

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Sometimes, it’s not so much that we read the Bible, but that the Bible reads us. What I mean by that is that sometimes when we hear a Gospel passage, we are filled with questions to ask it. What does that image mean, why do they use this word, who wrote this story and where did it even come from? We interrogate the text, do research, pose questions, and try to draw deeper meaning out of what can sometimes look like an obscure, outdated, or obsolete passage.

But other times, the Bible does that to us. We’ll read a passage and instead of the questions it raises being about the text, the questions it brings into our minds are all about us. We’ll read a passage and word or phrase will jump out at us and all of a sudden we’re thinking about our own lives in relationship to that word or image. The angel says “Do not be afraid” – and we consider how willing we are to release what we’re most frightened of into God’s hands. God says to a reluctant Moses “Go to Pharoah” or a unwilling Jonah “Go to Ninevah” and we’re thinking about the hard but good places that we’ve gone in our lives because we knew it was right to go there – or the ones to which God is currently asking us to go. Paul writes of “sighs too deep for words” and we remember the times when we thought grief would overwhelm us, but it didn’t and our faith grew stronger. Sometimes the deeper meaning of the passage isn’t in the story, it’s in our story. Sometimes the Bible reads us.

Today’s Gospel feels like one of those times to me. We hear this Gospel a lot, the one about Jesus calling his first disciples to Follow Him. I’ve spent a lot of time over the years doing research on this passage, trying to read it with greater insight and wisdom. I’ve asked all kinds of questions of this text: Who were those fishermen? Were they poor and seeking a way out of desperate lives, or were they middle class guys looking to learn something new? Did they know who Jesus was when he called them? Were they obeying a Messiah, or were they following their curiosity?

But despite the many hours I’ve spent reading this text, whenever I come across it, it always ends up reading me. Because at the heart of this passage is the core invitation that Jesus offers to every single person who encounters him in scripture, in life, or in prayer: Follow Me.

My ear always catches the word follow. In the context of following Jesus, we often take the meaning of that word to mean something like obey. To follow Jesus is to obey his commandments: to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbors as much as ourselves. That’s part of what it means to follow Jesus in any time and place. And working out how to do it is the reason why we have Christian community. Because it isn’t always clear how to follow those commandments, and we need support not so much in being right, but in continuing to strive. But to obey is not the only way to understand the word follow. And it isn’t what those first fisher-guys were doing when they left their nets. They weren’t following a creed or a teaching at that point (also, there was no creed or teaching yet). They weren’t committing to a radical new way of life in that first moment. They were following Jesus the way I might “follow” someone on Facebook. They were choosing to draw near, to try and learn more about Jesus. This is what it meant for them to follow him at first. And it is only because they chose to follow in this more casual way at first, that they could learn about, become attracted to, and ultimately spend their lifetimes striving to follow Jesus with more commitment.

So what does it mean to Follow Jesus? Not just then, for Peter and the others, but now, for us. It seems appropriate that we hear this Gospel near our Annual Meeting Sunday every year. Because, even though the business part of the our meeting is focused on the apparatus of church – the committees and budgets and elections and such – the core purpose of our church and indeed of all Christian communities, is to walk together and sustain each other in the work of following Jesus in our time and place.

Our time and place isn’t an easy one in which to follow Jesus. The values he embodied in his life and that attracted many of us to him, are less and less commonly held, and feel more and more counter-cultural. Values like: truth telling, thoughtful care for the most vulnerable people in our communities, sharing our resources based on need not merit, love for our enemies. Because fewer and fewer of our communal institutions are embodying and promoting these values, Christians seeking to follow Jesus in these ways need each other more and more. Together we remind ourselves that this is what it means to be faithful. Together we comfort each other when our hearts our broken by our communal failure to live up to them. Together we sustain each other in renewing our commitment to following Jesus in these ways.

So how do we do it? How do we follow Jesus in our time and place? To answer that question, here’s how I read today’s Gospel (or really, how it reads me) in three ways.

1) **Leave your nets**. If you want to follow Jesus, what do you have to let go of? In the Gospels, Jesus was always going somewhere, always on the move. You couldn’t carry too much with you if you wanted to follow him through Galilee. For us, it’s more metaphorical. If we’re going to move forward in our lives of faith, what can’t come with? Or, maybe put differently, what parts don’t we need any more. It must have been frightening on some level for Peter to leave his net, even if he thought he was coming right back. After all, it was his livelihood and a core part of who he was. Jesus affirms his core identity as a fisherman. But Peter’s not going to need the net anymore. Jesus affirms your core identities too, but what ways of living out those parts of yourself might no longer be needed?

2) **Notice before speaking.** We know from the rest of the Gospel that Peter loved to talk. He was the kid who raised his hand every time the teach asked a question, and was wrong more often than right. But here, he doesn’t speak. He notices. Our time and place is full of words, full of speech. Smart people are expected to have opinions on everything. And response time is expected to be instantaneous. Even in some parts of Christianity, following Jesus is all about saying the right things. But to follow Jesus today, may be a call to notice more than to speak. Noticing is at the heart of apprehending truth. It involves attentiveness to what is going on outside of yourself, and to what is going on inside of yourself – your whole self, body mind and spirit. Following Jesus is about cultivating the ability to notice more fully what the truth of the moment is, before beginning to speak. How do you deepen your ability to notice?

**3) Be Courageous.** Ultimately following Jesus is about courage, because it requires trust. It was risky business for Peter and the others, leaving behind everything they knew except each other. So too is following Jesus today. In fact, it’s maybe even riskier, because most of us don’t completely leave behind the lives we’ve had to start new ones. Instead, we integrate our life with Jesus more and more into the other dimensions of our lives. In some ways, it may take more spiritual courage to try follow Jesus in the context of relationships and obligations you’ve take on, than to walk away from them and start over. Following Jesus means persisting in the creative work of integration and trusting in where that will lead.

However each of us choses to Follow Jesus in our own lives, church is for encouraging each other in our efforts. For welcoming, comforting, challenging, and strengthening those who long for a life with Christ. And it’s what we do here, week in and week out. Because we can’t live the way of love alone -- and we feel deeply called to live that way, for the sake of ourselves, for the sake of others, and to bring glory to God. Amen.