

Follow Me

The Rev. Dr.
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Mark 1:16-20

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

*Suddenly, I
felt really old.*

I visited Club 56 on Friday night, which is not a night club. It's a gathering of 5th and 6th graders from our church and community, 50 or so, who meet at our church on Friday nights. Initially, I didn't want to go, but I loved it. I was fascinated by their unbridled enthusiasm, their yearning for peer-group friends and the heating up of boy-girl attractions and rivalries.

I sat on a stool and was peppered with questions; ones they had generated beforehand as well as others asked on the spot. They asked questions about other religions, questions about the afterlife—heaven and hell and the role of angels, questions about the end of the world, questions about why they have to go to church and how someone could live in the belly of a whale.

They asked about my favorite movie. I answered Field of Dreams. When they were later to recall my favorite movie, one boy thought it had something to do with what someone did in a field. Suddenly, I felt really old.

Afterward, one younger sibling asked me about the book of Job. As a 4th grader, he read all 42 chapters but

couldn't fathom why God seemed angry with Job by the end of the book. When I was in 4th grade, I was not pondering the mysteries of Job, I can assure you.

They asked plenty of questions about Jesus. Why are crosses in this church empty while other churches still have Jesus on the cross? Why can't we perform miracles like Jesus did, such as bringing people back from the dead?

Their questions dovetail well with our sermon series on Mark. We will concern ourselves with three questions over these next four months. Who is Jesus? Why did he come? What is our response?

We left off last Sunday with the inaugural words spoken by Jesus in Mark's gospel: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the gospel" (1:15). After this grand announcement, you might expect something big to happen next. Instead, Jesus walks along the seashore and comes upon two brothers fishing. "Follow me," Jesus calls out to Simon and Andrew. Mark reports they follow, no questions asked.

Jesus proceeds along the shoreline and meets up with another set of brothers sitting in

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their boats mending fishing nets. Jesus calls for James and John to follow him. Without saying a word, they get up and follow.

This story has always mystified me. Whatever prompts these four to mutely follow Jesus? Mark leaves out the stuff I'd really like to know. Did they talk with Jesus about following him? Did they want more time to think it over?

Maybe there's more to this story than meets the eye. John writes in his gospel that Andrew and Simon were originally disciples of John the Baptist. So, they were probably prepped for Jesus' Messianic coming.

Mark is a tersely-written, action-packed gospel. He leaves off superfluous details and writes in such a way to underscore Jesus' directive, "Follow me."

There's one word that appears in both call stories. In verse 18, after Jesus directs Simon and Andrew to follow him, Mark tells us "...*immediately* they left their nets and followed him." When Jesus issues the same invitation to James and John, we read in verse 20 that "Immediately he called them; and they left their father in the boat." Immediately communicates urgency. Now that the kingdom of God has come near, there's no time to lose.

When I hear the word "follow," Twitter comes to

mind. Twitter is a micro-blogging service that allows people to post up to 140 character messages. You can track friends and celebrities, sports and business developments on Twitter. Those who subscribe to other people's tweets are called followers. The person with the largest number of tweets, Lady Gaga, boasts 7.6 million followers.

Twitter calls them followers, but they're really fans. Fans come and go but followers follow. Jesus isn't seeking fans or curiosity seekers, he's recruiting followers. Follow is a spatial term meaning to walk behind someone.

I might have expected Jesus to say something such as "follow God" or "follow my teaching," but "follow *me*"? It's a bold, audacious claim and more than a little presumptuous unless Jesus is the real deal and is worth following.

If I venture into Whole Foods after worship today, stand next to the salad bar and call out, "Follow me," what do you suppose those Whole Foods patrons will do? Will they leave their shopping carts and follow me? They will probably tell me, in so many words, Go, follow yourself!

"Follow me and I will make you fish for people," Jesus says. The only fishing I've ever done was with rod and reel. I've used bait on hooks and fancy lures to catch unsuspecting fish. The people in Jesus'

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day used nets, with weights attached, to settle on the bottom of the sea. Then, using ropes, fishermen would draw the net together and enclose the fish.

Don't make more of this fishing metaphor than Jesus intends. If Jesus was speaking to physicians, he might talk about healing people's souls. If he was talking to auto mechanics, he might say something about repairing broken people. But since he's speaking to fishermen, he talks about fishing for people. Our goal is not to bait people or hook them into believing. If there is any catching to be done, it is catching people with the love of Christ. We cast our nets wide to extend God's grace and mercy.

Our focus over the next four months will be Jesus' identity, mission and call. Today's lesson is clearly a call passage. What can we observe about these four followers? You might regard the following points as the "so what?" portion of today's sermon.

First, *Jesus calls ordinary people*. His first disciples are culled from the ranks of common tradesmen. Jesus doesn't consult a who's who list to select his disciples. He calls everyday people to join his mission.

Yet, their very ordinariness is precisely the point. Consider the outcome of these four fishermen. John becomes the first bishop of Ephesus. James becomes the first apostle to die a martyr's death. Andrew takes

the gospel to the borders of Russia and Peter carries Jesus' message to Rome itself.

Second, *Jesus calls people together*. He doesn't call people solo; he calls them two-by-two. And, when it comes time for Jesus to send his disciples out, he sends them out two-by-two. We're not called alone, we're called together.

Third, *Jesus calls people to leave things behind*. Jesus calls these four fishermen to leave things behind. Andrew and Simon leave their nets. James and John leave their father in the boat.

This passage isn't suggesting that we take leave of work and home responsibilities to follow Jesus. I've known cults who have tried to manipulate this story to mean as much. Jesus teaches that the kingdom of God takes priority over temporal concerns. Our work and home life become the arenas where our discipleship is put into play.

Maybe it's time to leave behind something you have been carrying around with you. Maybe you are nursing old hurts and resentments. Perhaps you're carrying around the excess baggage of guilt and shame. Let it go! Jesus invites us to lay our burdens down.

What stands between you and following Jesus? Could it be a fear of what Jesus will ask you to do? Could it be anxiety about what you will be asked to relinquish? Could it be worry

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"We walk by faith not by sight."

-1 Corinthians 5:7

over what other people may think of you?

The mission of our church is disciple-making. We are learning all our lives what it means to follow Jesus. Since the fall, we have printed on the cover of our bulletin the logo with words *In Christ Together for the World*. Haven't you wondered what it means? *In Christ* is one of Paul's favorite prepositional phrases. The preposition "in" suggests location and identity. We are not who other people say we are; we are who Christ says we are. We belong to him, and our identity is centered in him. We are *in Christ together*. We're not called into discipleship alone. We're in this thing together. We are "*in Christ together for the world*." It's for the sake of the world that we're in Christ together. Jesus calls us to join him in his mission of catching people with God's love.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that following Jesus is an easy, magic carpet ride. It's a challenge to walk by faith. You may be facing circumstances right now where life doesn't make sense or the way doesn't seem clear. "We walk by faith not by sight," Paul writes (1 Corinthians 5:7). Appearances can be deceiving. Christ has our best interests in view.

George MacDonald wrote a story for children in the 19th century called *The Princess and the Goblin*. It's a story about a little girl named Irene, who

becomes lost in a castle and climbs to the top, where she finds an old woman spinning a thread. The old woman turns out to be Irene's great-great grandmother, who presents her with a special ring. Attached to the ring is a thread so fine as to be invisible to the eye but can be felt whenever Irene tugs on it. Her grandmother instructs her to use it in danger. She is to put the ring under her pillow. If you find yourself in danger, take the ring and lay your finger along the thread and follow the thread wherever it leads you. "Remember" her grandmother says, "it may seem to you a very roundabout way, but you must not doubt the thread. Of one thing you may be sure, that while you hold it, I hold it too."

Irene soon finds herself in danger and remembers the ring under her pillow. She takes the ring, finds the thread and starts following it, believing it will lead her back to grandmother. Instead, it leads her along the floor, out the door, across the yard and up the side of a mountain. The thread leads to a large hole in the mountain and a pile of stones. Irene is now frightened and attempts to follow the thread back, but the thread vanishes in her hands. She begins removing the stones to follow the thread and finds a trapped boy named Curdie.

This children's story becomes a lesson in faith. Irene tells Curdie that sometimes you must believe without seeing.

***Following
Jesus puts us
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Following Jesus may lead us to some roundabout paths and steep mountains. Sometimes he leads us to a heap of stones we'll have to painfully remove with bleeding hands. Following Jesus puts us on a lifelong journey to rescue others.