

“Follow Me” Is a Daily Choice

Mark 1:14-20 Jonah 3:1-5, 10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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With an exceptional economy of words, by the time we get to only the 14th verse of the first chapter in the Gospel of Mark he has already introduced us to John the Baptist, told of Jesus' baptism and his time of temptation in the wilderness, and that John has been arrested. Now, the gospel writer moves to the actual ministry Jesus' initiates.

Today we're going to explore the issue of what it means in your life and mine, and in the life of this community of faith, to answer Jesus' call to follow him. As a way to get into this topic, let's take a look at today's Gospel reading from the first chapter in Mark. In the area of Galilee, located in the northern part of Israel, Jesus came "proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'" There are so many sermons in just those two verses alone, such as addressing the topics:

- What is the good news of God?
- What does it mean that the time is fulfilled?
- What is the kingdom of God anyway, and what does it mean that it has come near?
- What does it mean to repent?
- And what exactly does "believing in" the good news entail?

Most likely, these verses simply act as a summary statement, of sorts, of what Mark plans to explore in detail later throughout his gospel. And since the assigned lectionary gospel readings throughout this entire year will deal primarily with the Gospel of Mark, we too will wait until a later time to flesh out these issues.

Mark moves quickly to his story of Jesus calling his first disciples. Jesus' ministry begins by forming and calling together a community. We learn that community is crucial to his, as well as our, ministry efforts. We're told that as Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee, he saw a man named Simon (who will be renamed Peter) and his brother Andrew. Both were working together to cast a net into the sea. I always find it humorous that Mark includes the description, "for they were fishermen," like his readers needed an explanation of why two grown men are throwing a net into the sea. Jesus simply tells them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." **The focus of Jesus' ministry will be on people!**

Without any explanation of why, Mark tells us that they "immediately left their nets and followed" Jesus. The same thing happens with Jesus' call to brothers James and John. They were fishing in a boat with their father and the hired hands. This was obviously a family business and their livelihood. While the act of immediately leaving their profession seems unlikely on a literal level, the gospel writer is simply following the common literary pattern known as a "**call story**," dozens of which occur throughout the Old and New Testaments. A primary characteristic of most call stories is to explain **the abruptness and total commitment demonstrated by those being called by God.**

For us, however, that doesn't mean that it might take some time to discern if and to what we are being called to do by God. I've always liked the definition given by Presbyterian writer and theologian **Frederick Buechner**, who passed away just last year:

The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.

The primary purpose of a biblical call story was to indicate that **answering the call of God to faithful discipleship always comes with a cost**. We, like they, are therefore being informed that we must be willing to give up something in order to bring the good news of God to others. That shouldn't really surprise us, however, because there is no ministry effort that doesn't bear a cost, whether it be in the form of the sharing of our time, our talents, and yes, often our financial resources. And like all of the disciples Jesus called, **that sometimes involves moving out beyond what we find familiar and comfortable**. There's not a pastor I know that didn't feel this when they discerned they were being called into the profession of pastoral ministry. There's not an elder I know who hasn't experienced this when discerning the call to a role of active church leadership.

A major point of the story of Jesus' calling of the first disciples is to indicate the **response** of those being called by God. While these four fishermen responded by immediately dropping everything and following Jesus, there are other biblical examples that differ. For instance, **Moses'** first response was to say that he had a speech impediment and that God should send somebody else to Pharaoh. **Jonah's** first response was to get into a boat and hightail it in the exact opposite direction of where God wanted him to go. Therefore, as we heard in today's Old Testament reading, God had to call Jonah a second time. God may have to do the same with you and me.

Here, then is what we are faced with. **If you and I are also called by God in one fashion or another to a particular ministry of one type or another, which I fully believe we all are by virtue of our baptism, then it makes sense that we should also pay careful attention to how we respond**. Even if we begin by giving some kind of justification of why God must have called the wrong person or congregation, how do you and I, and we together as College Hill, eventually respond? Again, while it may occasionally take more than one call, let me proudly state that this congregation, for 112 years now, has a very long history of answering the call to faithful and active discipleship. And yes, that has often meant moving beyond the familiar and comfortable.

Concerning an actual call to discipleship itself, how do we "hear," experience, or discern that call in the first place? Trying to precisely describe just *how* God calls us varies, I believe, from person to person. I've always contended that **God speaks to each individual's heart, mind, and spirit in whatever way and manner that that person is capable of hearing and understanding**. And that depends upon one's own theological understanding of the nature and character of God. Therefore, how we hear God's call may even change throughout our own journey of faith, as it has in mine as my own theological understanding of God has changed. The same may be true for you.

I believe there are a few things, however, that might help us to hear, to discern God's call to follow. **I would suggest that God is calling you to the particular type of ministry that excites you the most; that which you feel most passionate about; and that which energizes you**. That's the primary approach at our Annual Session Retreat, like

the one we held just over a week ago, when each of the elders used their discernment to decide which ministry team to serve on during the coming year.

I heartily suggest the same exercise to each of you. What area of ministry here at College Hill are you passionate about? What excites and energizes you? That is going to be a primary focus, with the addition of accountability, of our new **Let's Just Do It small group**, formed by the Rev. Gordon Edwards. It's first gathering will be this coming Tuesday evening. **Know that each and every one of our varied ministry teams is in need of additional volunteers to help support and work to fulfill that particular ministry effort.** If, perhaps, you need some help discerning your call to ministry in the context of this congregation, please give me or a ministry team moderator a call.

It's important to remember the simplicity and clarity of Jesus' call. "Follow me." **For those of us who associate ourselves with progressive Christianity, these two words, "follow me," have way more to do with living a way of life in the manner to which Jesus taught and modeled than it does to giving intellectual assent to a particular set of theological doctrines about Jesus.**

So as always, how you and I respond to that call to follow Jesus is up to each one of us, individually and as a community of faith. And because of that, **our response isn't a once-and-for-all choice, it becomes a daily choice.**

Amen.