

### **“Follow Me”**

In the name of him who calls to us, “Follow me”; dear friends in Christ: In this morning’s Gospel we see the Lord Jesus calling the first of his disciples into what will become their full time training to learn how to serve the Church that he himself will first redeem with his precious blood and then build to stand secure on the solid rock of the truth of his saving Gospel. We know from last week’s Gospel reading, however, that these four men whom Jesus calls, Peter, Andrew, James, and John, were no strangers to Jesus. At least three of them (and very likely the fourth) had already met him and had spent quite a bit of time with him.

They had first been disciples of John the Baptizer – and again, when I say that they were his disciples, I mean that they had stuck around with John longer than most people did who went out to the desert to hear that fiery forerunner of Jesus preach. It happened that some folks stayed to study the Scriptures under John for a while, and learn more about his message of repentance and the Christ who was about to be revealed. Maybe they stayed several weeks or months before returning to their homes, to their families, and to their regular jobs. That’s what these four men were doing – being discipled by John – when suddenly Jesus showed up one day and John said to them, “There’s the guy all Israel has been waiting for. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Hearing this, they left John the Baptizer and went with Jesus who, a couple days later, led them back to Galilee – which just happens to be the place they were all from. You may remember that Philip and Nathaniel also went with them.

But it’s important to understand in following Jesus, these guys weren’t thinking in terms of becoming his full time disciples like we normally think of when we talk about being one of the twelve. No, they had jobs. They had families. They had plans. And none of these plans included making the ministry of Christ’s Church (as we would understand it) part of their future. Besides, that kind of work – preaching and teaching the Holy Scriptures – was pretty much the domain of Levites, Priests, and religious scholars. You practically had to be born into it. And that makes what happens in this morning’s Gospel all the more extraordinary.

It’s several weeks later now. Since returning from the Jordan, Jesus has been maintaining a fairly low profile. He’s not been doing any public teaching that we know about. Peter and the others have returned to their work as fishermen. As far as they’re concerned, it’s back to the status quo. But then word comes of John the Baptizer’s arrest. In his tirade of preaching against sin, John was so bold as to call upon King Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee, to repent of the sin of running off with and marrying the wife of his brother Philip. At some point in the process, he also sent his own legal wife packing. But Herod didn’t like the bad press he was getting from John. I guess he was kind of like Newt Gingrich, that way; he thought it made him look bad in the eyes of his subjects – never mind that it was his adultery rather than John’s accusation that was doing the job. Anyway, to shut John’s mouth – and to warn anyone else who might speak out about his sin – Herod had John thrown into a dungeon at his desert fortress of Machaerus.

Jesus takes this as the cue to begin his own public ministry. He understood that John’s course was done. His mission to prepare the way was over. And now there would be no question of competition for people’s attention. So Jesus picks up right where John left off. The only difference is that John proclaimed the *coming* kingdom of God; Jesus proclaims that the

kingdom is here. “The time is *fulfilled*, the kingdom of God is upon you [it has to be: for the King is here]. Repent and believe the good news!”

We’re not told what kind of reaction he got as he went through the towns of Galilee preaching this message; but we can well imagine that it caused something of a stir. Remember that at this point pretty much no one has ever heard of Jesus. Other than the six men who followed him here from the Jordan, no one knows that he’s the Christ. And he hasn’t performed any miracles or anything like that yet. So what would you think if some guy you’ve never heard of came along saying that the kingdom of God had come? You’d be asking, “Really? Where? I don’t see any kingdom. Seems like business as usual around here. What’s this nut case talking about?” What I’m saying is that the initial reaction to Jesus by most people would likely be doubt and disbelief. They might be thinking, “Okay, he can preach pretty well; but he’s making a lot of grand claims that he can’t back up.”

And no doubt our four fishermen friends are aware of this growing negative public perception of Jesus. Sure, they believe him to be the Christ; but they’re the only ones. And by going around saying the things he is, he’s making himself look kind of silly. They must have been wondering what he was up to and how this would all play out.

So imagine their surprise when he shows up at their work one fine day. Simon Peter and his brother Andrew are doing a little fishing along the shore – probably wading in the lake as they cast their lasso-like net out into the deeper water. Without warning or so much as a “How do you do?” Jesus says, “Come after me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” The remarkable thing is that they do it. They set down their nets and they go with him. A bit farther down the beach they come across the Zebedee’s fishing franchise. There’s dad, the two brothers James and John, and a couple of hired hands. They’re in their boats mending and cleaning the nets after a night of work. Jesus says to the brothers, “You guys come with me too.” And they do it. Just like that, they get up and go with Jesus. Isn’t that amazing? What’s going on?

Let me tell you first what isn’t going on. This text is often used as club to beat down believers and make them feel bad about their own commitment to Christ and to their personal witnessing. A sermon like that goes something like this: “See how willing these men are to give up their lives and turn their backs on everything in order to follow Jesus? See how eager they are to become fishers of men and save souls for Christ? So you too, if you want to call yourself a disciple, must be willing to sacrifice everything and commit your whole life to saving the lost!” This is often accompanied by the finger thing. The preacher, snapping his fingers at regular intervals says, “Every time you hear that sound, another person dies without Christ and goes to hell – and it’s *your* fault because you aren’t doing enough to share Christ.” When I hear someone say that I always want to respond, “Hey, dummy, if someone goes to hell every time you snap your fingers, then stop doing it!”

And please don’t misunderstand me. Yes, we should be committed to Christ and willing to make personal sacrifices for the kingdom; and yes, when opportunities arise to share the reason for the hope we have in us, we should take advantage of them. It’s just that guilt should never be the motivation for doing evangelism, and these things are not what this text is about.

Why not? Consider first that Jesus isn’t calling everyone to follow him in the same way that he is these four men. They are being called by Jesus to begin training for the public ministry. They are going to be his Apostles: the first pastors and teachers of the Christian Church. They are going to be singularly taught and equipped by Jesus to perform these roles.

They are going to be given authority by Jesus to exercise on his behalf. He's going to commit to them the task of "feeding my sheep". And the simple fact is that it's a task not given to everyone. So it's wrong to take this text and to apply it to every Christian as if it did.

But more than that, it's a mistake to emphasize the willingness of these four men to simply drop what they were doing and go with Jesus. The truth of the matter is they weren't all that particularly willing. None of them was sitting there thinking, "Boy, I really hate fishing. I sure do hope Jesus stops by today and makes me one of his hand-picked twelve disciples. I'd love nothing more than to leave this boring life of drudgery and head out into the great unknown with him." No. That kind of thought never entered their heads.

And look: the main point of this lesson is not the willingness of these men to leave everything behind and go with Jesus; but rather it's the power of Christ's call that compelled them to follow him. He could have said to a stone, "Follow me", and it would have obeyed. They couldn't help but go. The power was in Jesus' Word. Just as his voice gives life to the dead, so it gives the will and ability to follow where before there was none. And Jesus made it clear: "I chose you; you did not choose me." And he didn't say, "From now on you're going to be fishers of men." No, he said, "*I will make you become* fishers of men." It's his work on them. He does the transformation. When Christ calls men into the ministry of his Church, he also equips them with the training, the gifts, and the abilities to do the tasks he assigns them.

And he still does this today; the only difference is the means he uses to accomplish his goal. Through his Word and Spirit he inspires certain individuals to desire the noble task of serving as ministers in his church – but that desire does not make them ministers. First they go to seminary and are thoroughly trained. They learn to read and study the Scriptures in the original languages. They learn the doctrines contained in the Bible. They study the Confessions. They learn how to properly prepare a cogent Law and Gospel sermon message (and yes, as in any other vocation or calling, some learn their lessons better than others). But even all that training and education do not make anyone a minister of Christ's Church.

What makes a man a minister is the call of Christ that comes through a local congregation – which is the manifestation of Christ's own body (and of the kingdom of God) in that particular place. Through the call of the Church, Jesus says to a man, "You: Come after me. See these people – this little flock of mine? Take care of them. Speak to them my Words. Wash their sins away in Holy Baptism. Announce to them my blood-bought forgiveness. Feed them with my body crucified and my blood shed for them. Do these things for me. And don't worry: I will be with you. You will be my mouth. You will speak my Words. But the strength of the ministry and the power of the Words are mine. I will accomplish what I want done through you."

And quite frankly, I take a lot of comfort in that. I'm keenly aware that I'm not at all worthy of the calling of Christ. No one is; and yet Christ accomplishes what he wants done through those who are unworthy. I mean, what else has he got to work with? But the point is that it doesn't matter if I'm not a very good public speaker or if I'm not oozing with charisma and natural charm. Such things might make me more popular a pastor; but they won't make me a better one. Only Christ can do that, which is why I want to keep my focus on him, trusting that he who called me to this task will give me what I need to accomplish the work he wants done as I continue to listen to his powerful word.

And that, I think, is how this text applies to you; for you too have been called to follow Jesus and be his disciple – not by getting up and going to serve his church as a pastor

someplace (although who knows? Maybe that will happen to someone here someday) – but rather by following Christ as his disciple in your own vocations, whatever they happen to be. And just as Jesus equips me with his Word and Spirit to do the job he wants me to do; so also through the words he gives me to speak he equips you with his Spirit who gives you the will, the strength, and the ability to accomplish what he wants to do through you.

In practical terms, this means that every Sunday, at the very least, you have a calling from the Lord. Where I am called to speak the Word, you are called to listen. Where I am called to proclaim the Law of God, you are called to repent and confess your sin. Where I am called to announce God's forgiveness in Christ, you are called to believe the Good News. And together, as members of the body of Christ, we are all called to serve, to love, and to care for one another. All of this is entailed in Jesus' call to you to follow him. And the best part of it is that in listening to his call, he gives you the grace and the power to do it.

Therefore let us be eager to hear his voice, that we too may answer his call to "Follow Me." In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***