

“Follow Me”

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.” This simple message was Jesus’ first sermon. And as he launches his ministry he repeats it in synagogues all throughout Galilee. On the surface, it sounds exactly like what John the Baptizer had proclaimed; but it’s not quite the same. John stressed that the kingdom of God was imminent, right on the edge of appearing. Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God is here. He can say that because he is the King. And those who hear his message and do as he says, namely, repent and believe the Gospel (that is, the good news of salvation through faith in him) are citizens of God’s kingdom. But all that is a little fuzzy at this point. The rest of Jesus’ ministry will be about executing and defining exactly what the good news of the Christian Gospel is.

But for the time being and to get the ball rolling, we have before us the account of Jesus’ call of four of his disciples. I’ve got to say that it is one of the most misunderstood and most frequently misapplied texts in the entire Scripture. It is misused by some who emphasize the willingness of the four fishermen simply to drop everything, to leave behind their careers, their families, their plans for the future, their hopes and dreams. At the call of Jesus they forsake it all and go with him in an instant, in blind trust, not knowing where they go, what dangers they may face. That’s how dedicated are they to following Jesus. And you too, if you are to be a follower of Jesus must be just as willing, just as dedicated. And if not, well, what kind of weak and unworthy disciple are you?

Others, particularly those who emphasize evangelism above all things (usually at the expense of doctrine) stress the fishing angle. “I will make you fishers of men”, Jesus declared. And so fishers of men you are. And woe to you if you don’t catch your limit for the day. So get out there. Cast that net. Knock on doors. Hand out pamphlets. Witness to everyone you meet. And hang your head in shame if you don’t convert at least a half dozen people to the faith each and every day. Oh yes, this is a great text for laying guilt trips on Christians. But like I said, that would be to misunderstand and misapply it.

In the first place, this text is not about the willingness of the four fishermen to leave it all to follow Jesus as his disciples. If they had wanted to be his disciples, they would have gone to him and applied. That’s the way teachers acquired disciples back in those days. Students sought out teachers and asked to be trained by them, usually offering to pay for the privilege. That the four fishermen haven’t done that already tells us that they’re not interested. You see, at this point they know Jesus. They met him down by the Jordan River where John was baptizing. We heard about it last Sunday. They traveled with him back here to Galilee where they returned to their livelihoods on the lake and Jesus went off on a preaching tour stopping at synagogues all throughout the region. The four know Jesus and believe him to be the Christ, but the thought of becoming one of his disciples has not entered their minds. They’ve got work to do, families to feed and care for, lives to live.

That they drop everything at the call of Jesus to discipleship has nothing to do with their willingness. It has to do with the power of his call – the power of his call that makes the unwilling, willing. It’s like the call to faith in Christ. We don’t choose to believe in him. The sinful human mind and soul opposes him. That’s why we confess in the catechism “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him”. The human will does not participate in conversion; it is the object of conversion. Christ through his Word and the work and power of the Holy Spirit creates faith in him and the willingness to follow him. That’s why too we need to *keep* listening to Jesus, so that the Spirit can continue his work of making and keeping us faithful. *That’s* what this text is teaching us. You want to be a faithful and dedicated disciple of Jesus? Then you must continue to listen to his voice through the teaching of his Word.

Well, what about the fishing thing? Aren't we all called to be evangelists of the Christian Gospel? Aren't we to be fishers of men? In the broadest sense the answer is no, certainly not in the way the twelve were called later to be Christ's Apostles. They were uniquely trained and sent by Jesus to bear witness of his life and ministry – which they had seen with their own eyes and heard with their own ears. By their preaching and teaching they laid the foundation of the one Holy Christian and Apostolic Church.

The Church no longer has Apostles. The work the apostles did continues now through those who are specifically called by Christ through the Church to that task: evangelists, ministers, missionaries, and teachers who have been thoroughly trained and equipped to study and to teach the Scriptures. This is a task not given to all, and so it's wrong to use this text as a bludgeon to beat Christians up and make them feel guilty about not winning a certain quota of souls for Christ every day.

We are not all called to leave our lives and livelihoods to enter the full-time service of Christ's Church. But we *are* all called to discipleship. Jesus does bid every one of us, "Follow me." And follow him we do not by leaving our lives, our families, and vocations; but rather by following Jesus in them. Our task as disciples is first, foremost, and always to listen to Jesus. It's basic Third Commandment stuff: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it."

And by his Word Jesus makes us disciples willing to do his will, which is chiefly that we constantly repent of our sins and believe the Good News of the salvation he achieved for us by his life, death, and resurrection. This is what makes and keeps us citizens of his kingdom. It's also what makes us fruitful for his kingdom. Christ's Word and the power of the Spirit transforms us into more loving and devoted husbands and wives; better parents, more faithful and obedient children; better and more productive managers, employees, and business people; more caring and helpful friends and neighbors.

And yes, though we are not all called to be full time evangelists, as Christ's disciples we are called to give the reason for the hope that lies within us. That is to say, every one of us should be able to communicate the basic truths of the Christian faith when asked to do so. And people will ask. When they see in your life the evidence of your hope and faith in Christ, they will want to know what you've got that they haven't. Likewise, there will be times when you see someone struggling with life's issues who don't have that hope. You will know it's a perfect opportunity to share your testimony about Jesus. And you will be willing to do it because Christ has made you willing and you genuinely want to help a suffering soul. It doesn't have to be a thorough exposition of every fine point of theology. Last week we heard how Philipp evangelized his friend Nathanael. He told him that he had found the Messiah. Nathanael doubted it. So Philipp told him, come and see for yourself. He brought Nathanael to Jesus, and Jesus made him a believer and a disciple who followed him. And that remains the most effective method of lay evangelism. Most people who come to faith and join a church do so simply because someone they know invited them to attend. Jesus, by his Word and Spirit, brought them to repentance and caused them to believe his Gospel.

It's always the work of Christ. He created us. He saved us. He sanctifies us by his Word and Spirit. He leads and he calls us to "Follow me" giving us the will and ability to do it.

So then, let us follow Christ, our Lord, and take the cross appointed, and firmly clinging to his Word, in suffering be undaunted. For those who bear the battle's strain the crown of heavenly life obtain. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!