

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Joining Jesus...Called to Follow

Mark 1:14-20

1/21/18

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. (2 Pt 1:2)

Mark 1:14-20

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

A lot of learning happens in life by following. You have to follow the directions. You have to follow along as someone shows you the steps to take. We do a lot of following in our lives. You really see this need to follow in preschool. I like going down to preschool periodically throughout the day. I rile the kids up a little bit then leave them for the teachers to calm back down. Most of the learning in preschool comes from following a leader – the teacher. The kids can't yet read for themselves, they need someone to follow.

This Epiphany season we are learning to know Jesus. Knowing Jesus is the most important thing in life. The entire purpose of this life is to come to know Jesus and the forgiveness you have through him. It quite literally is a matter of life and death! Without Jesus there is no forgiveness, without forgiveness there is no heaven. So to know Jesus is to have life, life with God here and eternal life with him in heaven. To that end, so that you can know Jesus, God has called you to follow him. He has called you to know his love by faith and to follow where he leads.

In the Gospel this morning we find Jesus as he calls his first full-time disciples. There are quite a few surprising and interesting things in this call of the first disciples. Jesus didn't do what might have been expected when he chose his first disciples.

First of all, consider the location Jesus chose: Galilee, not Jerusalem. Instead of courting the fullest publicity in Jerusalem, the great center of the Jewish world, Jesus withdrew to Galilee, the Jewish province farthest removed from the capital and in many respects looked down upon by the proud inhabitants in and around Jerusalem.

But then there is also the timing. Mark tells us that Jesus called these disciples to follow him right after John the Baptist was thrown in prison. Why would anyone want to follow him then? If God couldn't keep John, who announced the coming of Jesus, safe, why would anyone want to follow Jesus?

This becomes even more evident when we think about the people Jesus called. Peter and Andrew, James and John, were John the Baptist's disciples first! And why these four? Peter, Andrew, James, and John were simple fishermen. There wasn't anything particularly special about them. They weren't influential men, they weren't wise and scholarly men, they were just your average fishermen.

If Jesus wanted to make the greatest impact, he should have gone to Jerusalem. He should have called some high-ranking government officials or leaders of the temple to follow him, not these four fishermen from Galilee. But Jesus didn't. He chose Peter and Andrew, James and John. He gave these four relatively insignificant men the high honor of being his first full-time disciples.

Thinking about these four brings another question to mind: Why did God choose you? Make no mistake about it, God chose you. You didn't choose him, Jesus made that point abundantly clear when he said to his disciples, **"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last"** (John 15:16). You couldn't choose to follow Jesus, you couldn't make a decision to believe in him. That was an impossibility because of your sin.

So for you to be a disciple, a follower, of Jesus, God had to choose you! And that's exactly what he did. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, **"But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth"** (2 Thessalonians 2:13). But why?

There are 7.5 billion people in the world today, 7.5 billion people God could have chosen to bring to faith in Jesus, 7.5 billion people to whom he could have given his grace. But God chose you, why? Was it because you are so influential and important? Was it because you are better than others? Was it because of anything that had to do with you? Paul could say the exact same thing to you and me as he said to the Corinthians so long ago, **"Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord'"** (1 Corinthians 11:26-31).

There was nothing in you that God saw that would motivate him to choose you. The only thing he saw in you before he brought you to know him by faith was sin! God chose you simply because he loves you. God chose you because he wants you to be with him forever in heaven. That thought alone ought to fill you with an overwhelming sense of awe and love! That thought alone, that God would love you and choose you, is unbelievable. If you can't see the wonder in that, if your mind isn't blown by the simple fact that God chose you...you better check your pulse!

Think again of those four disciples called by Jesus. Why would they follow him? After John was thrown in prison, why didn't they just wash their hands of the whole talk of a Messiah, of a Savior? The call of Jesus, the call to faith and to discipleship, carried with it the power to make that call effective in their lives. They followed Jesus because his call gave them faith to do so. They followed Jesus because through faith they saw and knew that he was their Savior.

And look what they were willing to give up for Jesus. All four gave up jobs to follow Jesus. James and John, it appears, left a relatively lucrative family business – they had hired men who worked for them. James and John left family behind, their father Zebedee stayed with the boat. The glory of being called by Jesus, of being invited to join Jesus and follow him, was more dear and precious and important than anything else. Why? They, by faith – given to them by God, understood that Jesus was the only one worth following! He was the only Savior. So they left all to follow him. They didn't think about their options, **"At once they left their nets and followed him."**

Could I do that? Could you do that? Am I saying that Jesus is now requiring you to give up all things for his sake, right here and now? No. Am I saying that Jesus is calling you to leave your job, leave your

family behind? Not necessarily. But, that God doesn't always require the sacrifice of everything should not dull our hearts to the reality that we should be ready to make such a sacrifice. The call of Jesus to follow him is the call to see him as our all in all, our greatest blessing, our dearest possession – the one for whom we would give up all else.

Jesus wants you to be absolutely clear on this – following him comes with a cost. I don't mean that there's a fee involved in being a Christian. The cost comes when we hear Jesus say, **“Follow me”**. To follow Jesus means to keep him first in your life, it means not allowing anything to come before him.

How does that look in our lives? Here, in the United States, with our freedoms, you're not likely to be forced to choose between your faith and prison, you're not likely to be forced to choose between your faith and your job. But the question of how much you're willing to give up for Jesus, what you'd be willing to leave behind for Jesus, is a good test for you to see where your priorities lie, to see who or what really is number one in your life. Is Jesus first, or is your work? Well, do you find yourself snatching up every opportunity for overtime even if that means you won't be able to come meet with Jesus in worship – something that is getting less and less regular in your life. Is Jesus first, or your child's activity calendar? Well, which are you more likely to do, skip a practice or skip a service? Is Jesus first, or your money? Well, do you even find room for him in your budget? Or is your budget just about you, what you want, what you “need”?

What we're talking about here is the First Commandment. **“You shall have no other gods”** (Exodus 20:3). When Jesus calls you to follow him, when he calls you to discipleship, that means keeping him first.

So look at your life. Your sinful nature doesn't want to follow Jesus, it doesn't want to keep Jesus first. Your sinful nature wants you to follow yourself, to put yourself first – your own needs and wants. So look at your life, who are you following?

Looking at our own lives and seeing how often we fail in our discipleship, in our following Jesus, do you marvel even more at Peter and Andrew, James and John? They left everything to become full-time followers of Jesus!

You know better than that. These were sinful men just like you and I are sinful. By themselves they would have rejected Jesus just like you and I often do when we put him after so much else. Here again we see the glory of Jesus that his call to discipleship, his call to follow him, had in it the power to overcome the unbelief and doubts of these four disciples. Jesus' call is what made all the difference.

That same call has gone out to you. Again, marvel at the fact that God has chosen you! God made you his child through faith. Marvel at the lengths to which God went to make you his child. He sent Jesus to make entrance into God's kingdom possible for you by taking away your sin through his death. He preserved his Word throughout the centuries so the good news of Jesus could be proclaimed to you. Then he sent someone to bring that Word to you. God has done all that for you so that you can share in the glory of the forgiveness of sins with him.

Now, Jesus calls you to follow him. His call, and the promise of his love and forgiveness, strengthens you to follow. He, through his Word, strengthens you to keep him as your highest good, your greatest treasure. His call fills you with an overwhelming sense of gratitude and joy that Jesus would choose you, that he would call you, that he would save you. That joy of salvation finds expression in your life as you

follow him. This Epiphany season as we learn to know Jesus better through his Word, give thanks that God has chosen you to follow Jesus.

Amen

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father -- to him be glory and power for ever and ever. (Rev 1:5-7)

Amen