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Who is Jesus? – Called to Follow

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Mark 1:14-20

14Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." 16As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 17And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." 18And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

As I read in our scriptures how Jesus calls his disciples together and invites them to follow him, I am both incredibly inspired, and incredibly challenged. Story after story, across each Gospel, we hear of the disciples dropping everything and leaving it all behind – their jobs, relationships, families, responsibilities, and expectations – to follow Jesus. Wow! What an amazingly inspirational and charismatic preacher and speaker Jesus must have been to have people, with such immediacy, picking up their roots and following when he comes to call. If we're being honest, I can't really see myself leaving it all behind – my job, husband, kids, life as I know it – to follow a traveling preacher into an unknown future. Can YOU imagine it? Picking up and leaving everything to follow Jesus?

Most of us would find it very hard to leave work and family and friends and all the rest, to venture into such an uncertain future. Does that mean we're more or less failures as Christians? Or that we are less faithful than Andrew and Peter, James and John?

I wonder if there's more to this story than a guilt trip because we can't even imagine following Jesus in the same way the early disciples did. I wonder how the author of Mark meant for us to read this story... in what ways it was MEANT to inspire and challenge us?

I suspect that we are indeed meant to find this story of disciples willing to follow Jesus inspiring. Yet I doubt that Mark imagined people following Jesus in quite the same way. I mean, he obviously knew that it was no longer possible for people to ACTUALLY follow the historical Jesus as did these four. Jesus' earthly life had already come to an end by the time Mark's gospel was written. So perhaps Mark's message to those reading in his day – as well as to us today – was more about following Jesus in general than it was about following him only by leaving everything behind.

Except that we can never follow “in general.” We follow him in particular and distinct ways that may or may not be like the first disciples. And that, I think, is the point. Each one of us follows Jesus in our own lives, our own realities, using our own unique gifts and talents... Perhaps we follow by becoming a teacher or volunteering at Lunch Break. Perhaps we follow by looking out for those in our schools who always seem on the outside and invite them in. Or by doing a job we love as best we can to help others. Or even by doing a job we hate but contributes to supporting our family and helping others. Perhaps we follow by being generous with our wealth and with our time, by listening to those around us and responding with encouragement and care, by caring for an aging parent, or a special needs child, or anyone else who needs our care.

There are any number of distinct ways that we can follow Jesus – here and now, in the world and time in which we live. What seems at the heart of the matter is that we can follow Jesus in all of these different situations and circumstances precisely by trying to imitate him – by trying, to treat others with the same regard, love and patience that he did, all different kinds of people, but especially those who are overlooked by society. This, I think, is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian: to try to live and treat others as Jesus did, embracing the values of inclusiveness, love, forgiveness, and healing that he radiated in word and deed. We pay attention to the outcast, the sick, the poor among us. We challenge the status quo. We seek justice and equality. We live kindly among our friends and family and among strangers. We allow our own faith and assumptions to be upended by new ideas and new experiences. We tread lightly on the earth. This is what it means for US to follow Jesus.

In our children's time, we were reminded that there will always be other things and other people who are tugging at us to choose a different path to follow, to make different choices – ones that put ourselves at the center, rather than God – or that twist up our priorities so that money or popularity or power come first – but when we feel that tug, we need to keep listening for the call of Jesus, first spoken to the disciples and still calling out to us today; “Follow me!”

As you look ahead to the coming week, think of all of the choices and interactions that lie ahead of you. Think of all the times and place and occasions where you might try to follow Jesus by treating others as we see Jesus doing. What are the different ways that WE can follow Jesus in OUR lives this very week? And I promise, that as we do so, we will live more fully into our identity as a beloved children of God, not only following Jesus, but reflecting the love of God that we receive back out into the world around us, and receiving the joy of living out God's love. The point isn't about being “better disciples” but rather it is about knowing and experiencing Jesus more deeply by following him.

In the closing passage of his book “The Quest of the Historical Jesus,” theologian Albert Schweitzer offers a similar insight that is still both poignant and relevant. Schweitzer argues that we can come to know Jesus fully and authentically only by following Christ. As he writes,

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the

conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

Such is this promise for us today... that as we respond to Jesus' call to follow him, and live out that calling in our everyday lives and interactions, we will come to know Jesus better, learning to love like God loves, and serve with our whole hearts as God's beloved. May it be so. Amen.