

The Art of Following

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
Jan 14, 2018– AM Sermon
Rev. Peter Jonker
Mark 1:16-20

Well, it looks like Jesus is all grown up. Just a couple of weeks ago he was lying in the manger, rosy cheeked, arms pinned to his side by all those swaddling clothes. The little Lord Jesus, no crying he made. He made no demands either. My how he's changed. Now he's walking by the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and in his wake there is a string of abandoned nets and empty boats and lives that have been turned upside down. Poor Father Zebedee. His workforce has been decimated!

This is surprising little passage. It's so simple and straightforward. Like all of Mark, it's written in basic, almost childlike Greek. But this simple little story points right at you and pins you to the wall. It looks you between the eyes and won't let you walk away. The way these disciples drop everything when they hear Jesus' voice. The way they follow without first talking to their family, without doing any kind of data analysis or cost-benefit analysis. There are no loopholes here, no wiggle room. Jesus looks at you and says. Follow me. And either you do, or you don't.

And when Jesus calls us to follow, let's admit there is something in us that resists the call. There's a bit of us that looks for loopholes. There's a bit of us that wants to say, "Well Jesus could you just define our terms here? What exactly do you mean by 'follow?' Is that maybe something I could work in on weekends? What about Tuesdays because Tuesdays are pretty good for me. Could you possibly give me a week to think about it because...well...I've got a lot of irons in the fire, things on the go. You know how it is." We resist because we don't want to give up control of our life and its schedule. That's what it means to follow after all. Any time you follow you surrender a bit of your will, your time, yourself. Every time you follow you're leaving some kind of net behind on the beach. And we don't like surrendering our will and our stuff. To instantly surrender your will and your power to another person, to let another human being decide the direction of our life, it sounds un-American.

If you want to see how we feel about following, imagine this scenario. A young couple has their first parent teacher conference for their young child and during the conference the teacher tells them, "Your child is a follower. He follows the lead of other kids in the class." What do they think? They are mortified. They are worried. They wonder what kind of trouble he will get into in his future. They view this label as a sign of weakness in their child, and immediately set about training him to be independent. Another parent comes to a parent teacher conference and hears exactly the opposite. "Your child is a leader!" the teacher says. "The other children follow her!" Now how do the parents react? They beam. They're proud. Even if the teacher tells them that their little girl is leading her classmates into mischief, the parent still has the swell of pride that their daughter is a leader among her peers. That's the way we instinctively respond. No parent in our society wants their child to be a follower. It's a sign of weakness.

In fact, following is so uncool in our society that it may paradoxically have led to a leadership crisis. Historian Garry Wills has written on leadership called *Certain Trumpets*. Wills reviews many of the modern books on leadership and he observes that many of these books lament the fact that there don't seem to be any great leaders anymore. "Where are the

Churchills? Where are the Lincolns? Where are the Roosevelts?" these books ask. But Wills wonders if these books might not have the problem backwards: maybe the crisis of leadership is really a crisis of followership. In the mad stampede for everyone to be a leader and to behave in bold independent ways, who is left to follow? "We have thousands of books on leadership, none on followership," writes Wills, "The ideal seems to be a world in which everyone is a leader – but who would be left for them to be leading?" Leadership only works if there are people willing to follow.

Because people don't like following, because it's uncool and uncomfortable, a new mode of being has become popular in our world. People who don't want to be followers are choosing to be observers. Many people will readily admit that they have no desire to be a leader. They have no interest in being out in front rallying the troops and calling them to action. But they don't really want to be a follower either. They don't want to leave their nets and surrender themselves. And so they choose to become observers. An observer doesn't lead, he doesn't follow, and he stands back and keeps the whole scene at arm's length. He watches, he analyzes, and he leans over to another observer standing next to him and makes a comment. An observer floats above the fray, keeps herself uncommitted and takes care of himself. It's sort of a place of suspended animation. It's an attractive position. I think there's a lot of observer in each of us. When I went to seminary, they used to quote the following statistic. They used to say that in a typical church, 30% of the people do 90% of the work. That means 70% of the people are observers. I think that LaGrave does better than that. But still, that's an alarming statistic. Observer may be an attractive position, but it's not the most helpful. And more to the point, it's not what Jesus calls us to. In this passage Jesus is not calling us to be observers, Jesus is calling us to surrender ourselves. He's calling us to deny ourselves, pick up a cross. He's saying to us, follow me!

Now, how do we answer Jesus' call? We know what Jesus is asking, now how do we become a real follower? That's the question I want to address in the rest of this sermon. In our passage it is pretty clear that the secret to being a good follower is action. Following is about action. Observers watch and comment. Followers drop their nets and go. What's really extraordinary and challenging in this passage is how short a space there is between call and action. Jesus calls Simon and Andrew and – BOOM – they drop the nets and they're off. Usually the deliberative gap between call and action is bigger than that and it's in that deliberative gap that discipleship gets bogged down.

Let me try to explain what I mean. Think of human life as a series of three circles, one inside the other, like a target. There's a big outer ring, a middle ring and a center circle. The outer part of the circle is the area of imagination and fantasy. Think of it as the realm of your daydreams. Here's where a call usually settles first. Someone calls you to do something and you say, "Hmmm! Interesting!" And in a very general way, you start to daydream about doing this thing, answering this call. For example: maybe you hear this Bible passage read in church and you think, "Huhhhh. Fishing for people. I should really do more to share the good news of Jesus with others. I should do more evangelism." It's good to have these thoughts of course. It's a good first step. But daydreaming is not following, and a lot of the time the call of God never really gets past our daydreams.

The second circle of our target is the realm of the intellect. Now you move beyond daydreaming about the call, and you begin to think more seriously and specifically about following. You're analyzing and getting information about the subject. Instead of simply dreaming about sharing the gospel, you read a magazine article about it. Maybe you attend some

evangelism training offered at church. There you hear that nurturing friendships with unchurched co-workers and neighbors is one of the best ways to reach people in our suspicious culture. And you think: “We could have the Baghdadi’s over. They’re nice neighbors. It would be fun!” This realm of the intellect, this more specific thinking, is better still, but it’s still not following and a lot of the time the call of God never gets bogged down here as well.

The center circle is the realm of the will, it is the realm of action. This is the circle where followers are made. When you live in this circle you aren’t daydreaming about evangelism, you aren’t just studying how best to do it, in this circle you’ve called the Baghadas and the date is on the calendar and the casserole is in the oven. In this circle you’ve dropped your nets and left your boat and your heart is pounding as you follow your Lord down the road. When Jesus calls us to follow him he is calling all of us to enter the final circle, the circle of action. He’s calling us to change daydreams and plans into concrete actions.

It’s a hard step to take, entering that middle circle, turning daydreams into actions. William Law, an 18th century Theologian, noticed how hard this step was for people. Law observed that the men of his day, even professing Christians, were prone to much coarse talk and foul language. (Some things never change.) And he wondered how this could be so. It is not as if they don’t know it is wrong, nor are they helpless to obey God’s desire, the basic problem is that they do not seriously intend to change their ways and follow Jesus. He writes: “If you will stop here and ask yourself why you are not (obeying God in this matter) your own heart will tell you that it is neither through ignorance nor inability, but purely because you never thoroughly intended it.” In other words, people daydream about cleaning up their language, but they never really will it, they never move to the center circle, they don’t become followers. William Law is pretty direct. But probably no more direct that Jesus’ call to follow him. Law simply speaks the uncomfortable truth.

Why is Jesus so direct with us, so thorough in his call for discipleship? Why does he want all three parts of the circle from his followers? It’s not because he’s controlling. It’s not because he enjoys having submissive minions. It’s because he wants us to live in joy. Because it’s when our dreams and intellect and our actions are all working together for him that we are fully alive. It’s when all our dreams and intellect and actions are all apprenticed to Jesus that we find how real life is supposed to look and feel. When we live in the realm of daydreams and never act, what kind of life is that? It’s not living; it’s just existing. Jesus’ call to follow him is not a harsh demand, it’s an opportunity, and it’s an invitation to a better life. The call to follow is an offer of grace. If you’re like me there are a whole host of things you’re daydreaming about right now. There are a whole host of things that you’re thinking about doing sometime. I’m sure every person here has some discipleship fantasies: Maybe you’ve been thinking of becoming a foster parent. Maybe you’ve been thinking about becoming a tutor. Maybe you’ve been thinking about inviting you’re un-churched LGBT neighbor over for dinner just to start up a friendship. Maybe you’ve been thinking about being more regular in your devotions with your spouse. Good ideas, good thoughts, good plans! But today Jesus calls you to go further. Today Jesus calls you to follow him.

Let me close with a story. A lot of the time children are better followers than adults. They are more willing to surrender themselves. They are less likely to get bogged down in the daydreams and plans. Early on in my ministry at Woodlawn I saw a good example of this. There was a family in our church who was helping a poorer elderly woman form our neighborhood. Her name was Ruby and she talked like this, “Hi Honey...How ya doin’ sugar.” She was a lifetime smoker, she’d had a complicated family life, and now she was on oxygen most of the

time. This family helped Ruby with rides and groceries and things like that. One day when they were helping Ruby and their nine year old daughter Lisa was along, the subject of church came up, and Ruby admitted that she didn't really go to church. 9 year old Lisa couldn't believe that. Without thinking too much, without getting involved in too much analysis she blurted out. "You don't go to church!? How come you don't go to church!?" Well that got Ruby thinking and that got the ball rolling. Pretty soon she started coming to our church, then she joined our church, pretty soon she was a regular up in the front row, her and her oxygen tank. It wasn't too long after that that Ruby died. Our whole church got together to thank God for her life, to thank God for the promises that were hers through Jesus Christ her Lord and to thank God for the amazing thing he had done through a nine year old girl who was willing to follow.

© Rev. Peter Jonker