

"First Followers."

Isaiah 9:1-4; Ps. 27:1,4-9; Matt. 4:12-22

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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A young woman was filling out an application for college when she came across the question: Are you a leader? She thought she had better be brutally honest, so she answered, "No." She was convinced when she sent the application in that she'd never hear from them because of that answer.

But she received a letter back from the school that read: "We have reviewed numerous applications and, to date, there will be some 1,452 new leaders attending school next year. We have decided to accept your application because we felt it was imperative that they have at least one follower."

Leadership. It is the characteristic and quality that is a decisive factor in today's presidential primaries. In politics, in business, in education, in service organizations, exhibiting leadership skills trumps being a good follower most of the time.

There are plenty of courses on leadership, how to identify your leadership style, how to hone your leadership skills, what people look for in a leader, and so on. Hardly a day goes by without someone sending an invitation to attend a life-changing leadership seminar.

I don't have a pile of invitations to attend life-changing follower workshops. Over against that pile of leadership brochures is the simple word of Jesus.

He extends a different kind of invitation. He offers training in how to follow. This is what he needs, first and foremost from each of us. His application doesn't ask: "Are you a leader?" Instead, he asks question: "Are you a follower?"

This is what Jesus asked the first disciples. He asked them to follow. Have you ever wondered what exactly it was about Jesus that caused those disciples to leave everything and follow him? The New Testament doesn't give us much to go on. We don't have a portrait of him. We don't want to think that he was some kind of hypnotist.

Jesus walks by and says; "Follow me and I'll make you fish for people"... and off they go.

How easy would it be for you or me to drop everything and follow Jesus? I have a hard time imagining any of us could just pick up and go without thinking of all the calls we'd have to make, all the arrangements that would be necessary, and all the explaining we'd have to do.

This would be especially true if the one doing the calling was someone like Jesus - a wandering preacher, destined to go up against all the power structures of culture and religion and ultimately die at the hands of those who wanted to be rid of this troublemaker.

In the face of such weighty and sobering realities, why would anyone follow him? Were the early disciples out of work and out of luck? Were they just looking for some good excuse to get out of the fishing business? Were they adventurous types who wanted to see the world? Did they have such a horrible home life that anything would be preferable to sticking around Capernaum?

We can only imagine Jesus' charisma and his appeal. Between his authoritative teachings and his miraculous healings, it was clear that this was someone worth paying attention to, someone worth following.

Jesus still is someone worth paying attention to and following today.

Jesus' first call went out to fishermen. His first invitation was for them to put into practice what they already knew: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

Is this just another example of Jesus' wit, cleverly turning the words of their profession into a call to discipleship?

Much has been made of Jesus' curious promise that these first followers will become fishers of people. If they had been accountants would he have couched his invitation in terms they knew? Would he have said, "Follow me and I'll have you managing the accounts of God's kingdom?" To the potter might he have said, "Follow me and I'll use your hands to reshape the world?" If they had been salesmen, you can imagine what he would have done with their natural talents and skills.

As it is, they were ordinary folk doing ordinary tasks. There was nothing special about them or about the work they were doing. Anyone looking at them might easily have passed them by. Yet, these were the ones that Jesus called, called to follow him and to learn from him and to gain a voice so that they could spread the good news of God's in-breaking kingdom in our midst.

I always get taken aback by this story because I realize that the way that Jesus approached them is the same way he approaches each of us. It's usually in the midst of our daily schedules and activities. He takes the talents and skills we possess and invites us to put them to use for kingdom goals.

It takes ordinary folks like us to fill out the roster of followers of Christ. It takes willingness to follow where he leads, to set aside pre-conceptions and prejudices and allow his words to infiltrate our hearts and minds and do the miraculous work they do.

It is much like the way God works throughout the Bible record and down through history. Again and again God turns our expectations on their ear. He sends most of the army home so that no one could attribute the victory to anything other than the work of God.

God gifts the barren couple with a child of promise. He sends the Holy Spirit to overshadow Mary. God achieves redemption through bringing life out of ignominious death on a cross.

Yes, clearly our God is anything but a straight line, power wielding, expectation-fulfilling God.

The call to the first disciples is just one more time when God reminds us that we are not off the hook, we can become as well-equipped for the job of following as anyone else in any time or place.

And like those first followers, we begin where they did - in close proximity to Jesus and his teachings. The call to follow means, first and foremost, that they will spend time in close contact with

Jesus. He won't send them out on these human fishing expeditions until they have had a chance to hear his teachings, witness his healings and get a clearer sense of who he is.

Each time we gather it is in response to Jesus' call to be followers. This is our primary task. We are called to understand what it is that God is doing through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that the world cannot do without and we cannot do without.

If the message of Jesus has managed to get under your skin, slip under your defenses and left you a little unsettled, a bit uncertain, wondering what God might be up to, know this: It is not your job or mine to chart the course of our shared ministry. That will become clear as we draw near to Jesus and listen to the voice that offers consolation and guidance and the promise of new life. Our ministry will take shape as we allow his word to shape us and to mold us into those who follow willingly and purposefully and sacrificially.

Like the first followers of Jesus let us be followers . . . first.

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