

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on June 12, 2022

THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Jesus said to Peter and Andrew, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. Mark 1:17-18

Today we begin our summer focus on the core stories from Jesus' earthly ministry. After his baptism by John, one of his first acts was to call people to follow him. The importance of this story is indicated by the fact that all four gospels share an account of this event.

I never really thought too much of this story until I heard a sermon on this text that asked a simple question.

I do not remember the preacher,
I do not recall what church
and I really do not remember much about the sermon,
yet I do remember the question that was asked.

"Are you following Jesus, or do you merely believe in Christ?"

At first glance this would seem to be a strange question. For it would seem that believing in Christ and following Jesus are the same thing. Yet while the two ideas are connected, there is a real difference between them. One indicates a dynamic life-giving faith, while the other indicates a static relationship with God that takes God for granted.

This question speaks to our present situation. You and I live in a time in which many people are bored. Pascal wrote:

Nothing is so insufferable to man as to be completely at rest, without passions, without business, without diversions, without study. He then feels his nothingness, his forlornness, his insufficiency, his dependence, his weakness, his emptiness.

Pascal is describing many people in our culture. There are so many people of many different ages who seem to be rudderless. They have no goals or purpose in life. They are nice people, yet they seem to drift along unable to settle on a direction for their lives. This is particularly true of males. There was a movie several years ago called "Failure to Launch". This movie told the story of a young man who still lived at home with his parents unable to find purpose in his life. He is a paradigm for many in the twenty something generation.

Christians are not immune to the experience of malaise. We too endure times in which we sense a lack of purpose in our lives. We know those times when we wonder if our faith really means anything to us. There are times when our lives lack any real direction and focus. When I have these melancholy feelings life becomes dry. I end up just going through the motions of living, just doing the things that I have to do, lacking any joy or enthusiasm. Life can seem to be standing still. Worship can become merely a matter of routine.

When our life seems without direction or purpose, we need to face the question, "Are you

following Jesus, or do you merely believe in Christ?" For the difference between the two makes all the difference.

Believing in Christ is an assent to a principle. We are saying yes to the concept that Jesus is the savior of the world. Believing in Christ is an affirmation of an idea. It means saying yes to an abstraction. It is one of many abstractions, which we deal with, and while it might be an important one to us, it becomes one of many things, which compete for our attention.

An affirmation of a proposition is a one-time thing. One affirms an idea and that is the end of it. This leads to stagnation. Change and growth are not inherent in mere assent to a proposition. It is an understanding of the faith that will lead to a lack of direction in our souls. Merely believing in Christ affects our minds but not our hearts, and will. Thus it will not change our daily lives.

In our text from Mark's Gospel, we find Jesus calling the first people to be his disciples. Peter and Andrew are the first two people that Jesus asked to join him in his mission. Jesus did not ask them to believe in him; no, he simply says, "Follow Me". What does it mean to follow?

First, Jesus told his disciples to leave their nets. In order to follow Jesus we have to leave things behind. Jesus called to Peter and Andrew to follow him and they immediately left their nets and followed him.

Peter and Andrew made their living catching fish. Their identity was bound up in the title "fisherman". It was what they were good at. But when Jesus came to the Sea of Galilee and said follow me, they had to leave fishing behind them. It would get in the way of following Jesus.

You and I also have to learn to leave things behind in order to follow Jesus. Real spiritual growth always means leaving some things behind in order to move on to something new and more important.

In his book **Night Out of Lisbon**, Erick Remarkque, compared the way some people often seek God, to people who say they want to learn how to swim but who insist on remaining fully clothed – with hat, overcoat, gloves, and heavy shoes – holding a bulging suitcase in each hand, and with a knapsack on their backs. Just as we must set aside our clothing and other impediments in order to learn how to swim, so, too, we must set aside the idea that following Jesus is just something we add on to our already full life.

You and I have to leave things behind in order to follow Jesus. It may mean changing how we view material possessions. It may mean giving up certain favorite activities. It will mean casting off certain sins.

This is not easy for us for there is always pain in the process of leaving. It is like a young adult leaving home for college. It is hard to leave the place in which they have spent their whole life growing up, yet growth demands leaving.

When we follow Jesus, again and again we need to be prepared to leave our nets when he calls us into his service.

Secondly following Jesus means learning from Jesus. When Jesus called Peter and Andrew to follow him, he was following the pattern of the rabbis of the time. Indeed it was a part

of the models of the great teachers of antiquity. Men of wisdom gathered around them disciples who lived with them and learned from them.

Jesus too had a group of disciples. These followers lived with him and they traveled around the countryside. It was in the long talks and times of sharing that these disciples learned from Jesus. It was not through black boards and lectures and long reading assignments that the learning took place. Peter and Andrew were to learn through eating with Jesus and seeing how he treated people and how Jesus spoke about his heavenly Father. It was by living day to day with Jesus that they learned from him.

You and I have also been called to live with Jesus. We can talk with Jesus. Prayer is a form of two-way communication. We are not to do all the talking in prayer. For we need times of silence to allow Christ to speak to our hearts. We all can have a sense of his presence and hear his voice when we give him the opportunity.

Thirdly, following Jesus means to emulate him. Jesus calls us to follow his example. When Peter and Andrew left their nets, they had no idea what was in store for them. As they followed Jesus, they saw him teach a message of love. But then they saw the people turn against him. They saw him betrayed, tried and put to death, and then they experienced that wonderful day when the Risen Jesus appeared to them.

Jesus called his disciples to follow his example of self-giving love. They too were called to comfort the sick, be with those who mourn and to love all people. This little group of disciples went all over the world doing the things that Jesus had done in their presence.

You and I are also called to follow Jesus' example of self-giving love. We too can sacrifice in order to help serve others. We can take time for the lonely and care for the sick and hurting in this world. We can be agents of forgiveness and love in our own community. Each day we can follow Jesus' example of loving in our own lives.

Finally following Jesus means taking the risk of following Jesus into an unknown future. Merely believing in Christ is a choice for security. It is pretending that we know all the answers. It is thinking that we have the world all figured out in tidy propositions. When Peter and Andrew were called from their nets, they had no idea where following Jesus would lead. So when we follow Jesus, we live into a future that we cannot see or plan. Life becomes an adventure as we discover where God will take us. When we seek to follow Jesus, our lives are infused with meaning and purpose.

The writer Richard Rohr tells us: **Worship of Jesus is rather harmless and risk-free; actually, following Jesus changes everything.**

In reflecting on our core story for today ponder the simple but profound question:

Are you following Jesus or do you merely believe in Christ?