

“Followership”

The Reverend Pen Peery

Date: January 14, 2024



Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

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Do you really think that is the way that it happened?

Did Simon and Peter, James and John really just see Jesus walking by the shoreline while they were cleaning out their tackle-boxes and decide right there on the spot to drop everything and follow when Jesus called?

That’s what Mark tells us. About Simon and Peter: “*Immediately* they left their nets and followed him.” About James and John: “*Immediately*, [Jesus] called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.”

Maybe it’s just the way that Mark tells the story.

Mark is the shortest of the gospels. Mark speeds through the details. There’s no story of Jesus’ birth in Mark. No Sermon on the Mount. No appearances of Jesus after the resurrection, even. Mark just seems like he is in a hurry. Maybe that’s why he tells the story this way.

But then again, if you read the other three gospels it seems that those whom Jesus calls to follow him have this same tendency to drop what they are doing...immediately...and go.

Maybe James and John and Simon and Andrew decided to follow Jesus because they were sick and tired of fishing? Who wouldn’t want to walk away from a lifestyle that required them to wake up before the sun and chase after slimy and stinky fish?

I have always had this assumption that the disciples that Jesus called were of a certain station in life. That is to say, I have always thought the disciples were down on their luck.

I mean, sure, dropping everything and deciding to become a disciple of Jesus is admirable, but (if I am being honest and exposing my own ignorance) how hard it is for someone who doesn’t have much to decide to give that up?

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When it comes to following Jesus, the story that has always convicted me is that of the Rich Young Ruler. You know, the man who comes before Jesus, asking about eternal life. He asks Jesus what he must do. Jesus tells him to follow the commandments. The young man smiles...he's kept them...he's even loved his neighbor as himself. Then Jesus says, "go, sell your possessions, and give your money to the poor. After that, come and follow me." And the young man walks away, grieving, because he had many possessions.

That's the story about following Jesus that convicts me because it is the one with which I most resonate. And, in a strange way, when I hear about the down-on-their-luck disciples that Jesus called in this morning's Scripture, the story of the Rich Young Ruler is also one that comforts me – because it suggests, perhaps, that well-to-do – or upper-middle-class – or upwardly mobile people like me just aren't as radical as the riff raff that ended up following Jesus around during his ministry. And that knowledge kind of lets me off the hook.

Well, here's something that might pop your bubble the same way it popped mine

Let's slow down and read this morning's scripture closely. Maybe you missed it the first time like I did: When James and John walked off after Jesus they left behind their boat, their father, and their hired help.

Hmmmm. While it is true that I am not an expert in the economics of ancient Palestine, but what I do know is that in a feudal society with Emperors and Kings there wasn't much of a middle class.

And the clues are right there in this morning's Scripture: James and John not only owned a small family business, they had a work force to help them run their business. Compared to the rest of the residents of Galilee, James and John's tax bracket was pretty high. Their station in life was much closer to my own than I originally had thought.

And when Jesus called them, they left it all behind. Immediately.

So I guess we're back on the hook.

And the question I wonder about (even as an upwardly mobile, middle-aged guy who is not down on his luck) is: what would I do?

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Maybe before we answer the question about whether we would follow Jesus in the same way the disciples did, it might be good to ask what about Jesus made people want to follow him.

And before you get smart and say, "because he was God's son, duh..." remember that there were quite a number of people in Jesus's day who claimed to be the Messiah – and remember that in Mark's gospel, Jesus was especially commitment to keeping his identity as the God's son a secret.

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Jesus had what 21st century marketing gurus call “followership.” He attracted a decent number of disciples – and a good amount of crowds – because he had...it...that intangible thing that connects to people...that speaks to them...and creates a sense of them wanting to listen and follow where you lead.

A few years ago – maybe near the start of the pandemic, actually, when my kids’ daily allotment of screen time took a dramatic uptick, I started hearing them talk about someone named Mr. Beast over and over. At first, I was alarmed, and worried that I didn’t have parent control settings quite right on YouTube. As it turns out, Mr. Beast is kid-friendly.

If you don’t know who Mr. Beast is, spoiler-alert: he’s not the Messiah. And me bringing him up in this sermon is not an attempt to equate him to the Messiah. But he can teach us something about followership.

“Mr. Beast,” whose real name is Jimmy Donaldson, is the most followed individual on YouTube. He’s 25 years old, dropped out of college to study algorithms for a few years, who now has 230 million people who subscribe to his channel.

To the untrained eye, it might not be obvious why Mr. Beast has so many followers. The first video of his that really went viral was of him counting to 100,000. It took him 40 hours – but he “sped up” the recording so that the video posted lasted only 24. In other video, Mr. Beast watched paint dry for an hour. In a video he posted a little over a year ago – a “short” – he asked a stranger if they would be willing to fly to Paris to bring him a baguette – they did. As of this month, that video has been viewed one billion times.

Mr. Beast is such a phenomenon, there are already podcasts and studies to try to understand why he connects so well to so many people. I asked my younger kids why they liked him, they said, “because he makes cool videos.”

But, then, they were quick to add that in most of his stunts or videos what ends up happening is that he helps people. Or is generous to people – tipping a pizza delivery driver ten thousand dollars. He connects his videos to his philanthropy – digging wells to provide clean drinking water, planting 20 million trees, buying shoes for an impoverished village, providing 10 thousand turkeys for his hometown of Greenville, NC.

I don’t claim to be a marketing guru, but it strikes me that part of what gives Mr. Beast the “it” factor, beyond his well-honed algorithmic skills, is because people know – intuitively – that when they follow him they are helping others. And there’s something about that that feels good – and leads them to want to see more.

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The Jesus of our day and age certainly has some people who attempt to market his message. There are a few new guys who stand on the corner of Trade and Tryon during the week – not our friend, Sam, but some others – whose message is pretty focused on scaring people into being Jesus’s disciples.

Maybe you’ve seen a billboard or two: “Jesus is coming soon, are you ready?” Or, “Repent and believe...or else!”

I’m quite sure that those who market Jesus this way have missed the mark.

Because – the way the Bible tells it – from the very beginning, following Jesus isn’t about what that gets us, or what it does to save us, or what protect us from.

Following Jesus isn’t about us.

Jesus invites us to drop what we are doing – to step off the path of living our lives for *our benefit* alone – in order that we might be a part of what Jesus is doing for the sake of the **other...for the world**.

That is why those first disciples followed.

They weren’t in it for themselves or for their salvation.

That wasn’t even a part of the conversation.

They followed Jesus because he told them the dream of what God intended the world to be was coming true, and Jesus needed them to focus who they were – and the gifts they already had – for the sake of helping other people.

“Follow me and I will make you fish *for people*,” Jesus said.

Don’t miss that he said that to fishermen.

Sometimes, I think, we have it in our head that in order to be called by God to do something we have to become preachers – or missionaries – or non-profit executives. And – as I live and breathe – sometimes that happens.

But most of the time Jesus calls us just as we are – and asks us to use the gifts we already possess for the sake of the promises that God will surely fulfill: of justice, and peace, and wholeness, and hope.

As far as I know, no one who will be ordained and installed as a Deacon or an Elder is a fisher-person (at least not for their day job). Rather, God has called people who are in high school, or who are stay-at-home moms, or retired engineers, or in finance, or lawyers, or teachers...to use the gifts they have for the sake of leading our church in such a way that we might be better equipped to serve the needs of **people** –

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people who call us their church home, and people who do not.

People who easily recognize Jesus as the Messiah – and people who do not.

People who bear the image of God in them – which is to say, everyone.

Simon and Andrew, James and John – they dropped their nets to follow Jesus, not because they wanted to save their own lives, but because they found Jesus’s invitation to be a part of saving the world compelling.

And I bet the same thing can be said about a church who seeks the same end.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.