

Third Sunday after Epiphany, C
Isaiah 9:1-4
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23

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First Immanuel Lutheran Church
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When I go to Fred Meyer, there is something that never ceases to amaze me. I'll be wandering through the aisles with my grocery list in hand, and I've forgotten where to find something like chocolate syrup (is it with the ice cream? with candy? or condiments?) Eventually I'll ask an employee for directions. They're usually busy, on their way somewhere, or in the middle of some task, and all I really need is the aisle number – but very often they will interrupt their work to say, "I'll take you there, follow me." Then they actually walk right along with me to locate my item. It seems like a little miracle every time. "I'll take you there, follow me."

Don't you wish more of life was like that? If you had a need or a question, someone would appear to say "Follow me. We can get that problem solved. Right this way." Don't you wish following Jesus was as simple as this? "Follow me" and some divine being would lead us right where we need to go in life's journey, show us how to be helpful to God and other people, make wise decisions, make a difference in this hurting world of ours. No more confusion or wrong turns. No more learning through costly mistakes.

Today's Bible story is suspiciously simple. Jesus said "Follow me," and those fishermen instantly left everything, their boats, their nets, their income. How did they decide so quickly? We don't know. Maybe they'd already known Jesus for a little while. What matters is that at some point these disciples made a radical commitment. They changed direction, they took on a new set of values, they focused their life on God's priorities and not their own. That's what it really means to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

I'm sure they had no idea what they were getting into, following Jesus. Even though the Savior was right there with them, they still made plenty of mistakes. Following Jesus to the cross brought more heartbreak and hope than they ever thought possible. But they answered the call, they followed through on the commitment.

It has never been simple to follow Jesus, but God wouldn't call us to if we couldn't do it. So if today we are feeling "less than" because we struggle to live a faithful life, then we need to let go of that. And if we're feeling unworthy to call ourselves disciples, we need to let go of that too. Because God is asking for commitment, not perfection. Following Jesus doesn't mean we have to be Jesus – that's impossible. Following Jesus simply

means we walk in Christ's path, we live God's "kingdom of heaven" values as best we understand them.

We focus on healing, not wounding. Building up, not tearing down. Kneeling to serve, not lording one's privilege over others. Promoting peace, not violence.

We forgive instead of demanding retribution. We respect all people, not only those who are like us. We examine social systems to root out injustice and work to see that people have what they need to live.

Thinking back over the last couple weeks, I have personally interacted with a whole bunch of people who are following Jesus. These are completely ordinary people, and I'm pretty sure they would never name themselves as examples of discipleship, but that's how I see them. I see them following a divine path.

Following Jesus looks like driving your elderly mother to the emergency room and waiting with her for hours until a room opens up. Following Jesus looks like taking your father to doctors' appointments week after week. Following Jesus means standing by a loved one who's struggling with addiction. Learning whatever you can about their condition. Practicing patience, cultivating good humor. There are easier days and harder days in following Jesus. This is how we stand on the side of healing. This is how we conduct our lives in the spirit of outreaching love, agape love, love that is generous and giving.

Following Jesus looks like running a small non-profit that's having hard times. Their vans have been stolen or vandalized multiple times. Money is tight, but the human need just keeps rising. It's easy to feel your mission is failing, but really it is so important for each of us to tend our own corner of God's universe, and attend to the people and the tasks God has put in our hands. And just hang in there, not give up. This is how we practice commitment, how we welcome God's love that fills us up too, love that renews our courage and keeps us following. Love that sustains us and this world with gentle grace.

At Emanuel Hospital, following Jesus means honoring the spiritual needs of *all* people, including those who *don't* follow Jesus. The hospital is creating a new chapel space that honors all faiths, not just Christianity – a place where all people can connect with Spirit, whether they are hospital employees or patients or families. This is a way to practice inclusive love, outreaching love.

Following Jesus can look like building affordable housing like the apartments going up across from church right now. That project, called Susan Emmons Place, will include units for very low income people who are moving from houselessness into permanent

housing, along with services to help them stay housed. It's exactly the goal that's on each of our minds when we see neighbors sleeping on the street. And that means every construction worker on that project is devoting their energy to ending houselessness, whether they realize it or not. And every Portland taxpayer has a part in it too, because it's funded by the Portland Housing Bond. And our friends at Lift Urban Portland are already arranging how to provide food boxes and emergency groceries when the clients move in. We'll have a chance to help out. Feeding people and providing shelter is as basic and sacred as it gets, as we follow Jesus.

Following Jesus can look like caring for animals – a dog, some cats, horses, even filling the bird feeders outside. You are sustaining the family of God's creatures.

Following Jesus can look like protecting the environment. Recycling, using energy wisely, preventing pollution. Helping people learn about nature and inspiring them to respect it, to preserve living things and beautiful places.

Following Jesus can even look like taking good care of your own health. Exercising and eating properly. When you are sick, stopping. Resting. Going to the doctor. What is the most essential gift God has given to you? Your physical being, this body that is your home throughout your years on earth. And these bodies don't last forever. They need care. It isn't selfish – it is faithful – it is a sacred calling -- to take care of your health, so you can serve God as energetically and long as possible.

I could lift up so many more. These are just a few ordinary, everyday ways to follow Jesus and help God care for the world and people God loves so much. We are never in this life just for ourselves. We are all part of the reign of God, the realm of love, which is transforming this world all the time.

When Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven has come near" it was not a warning, it was an invitation – to be part of what God is doing, how God is redeeming the time and healing all things.

Pastor Steve Garnass-Holmes reminds us that God's reality is always with us-- the reality of God's love is moving through all things. God's influence, God's reign, God's realm, is like the steady current of a river flowing beneath all the daily turbulence of our lives, just beneath what we see on the surface. God's momentum is like a melody that continues steadily beneath all the noise. I'll close with a few words of Steve's poetry – an invitation:

*Trade in your whole mind for a new one,
your eyes for a different set.*

*The world is a thin place. Step over the boundary
between seen and unseen—(God's realm is) so near, so near....*

*In every morning, every street corner,
every slant of sun, **grace thrums.***

*In every moment, every place,
love sings, its gravity unfailing...*

The music— do you hear it?

Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light* www.unfoldinglight.net Published January 19, 2023
from a poem called [The other world](#)

God is calling us to join in. Thanks be to God. Amen.