

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, A
Isaiah 9:1-4
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23

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Our Bible reading for this morning seems so simple and straightforward-- even a little too simple, maybe. "Follow me," Jesus says, and immediately Peter, Andrew, James and John drop everything. They leave the fishing trade that is their livelihood, leave their nets & boats behind, leave their father, their old lives, and follow Jesus on a completely new path. Am I the only person here who finds this passage a little hard to relate to?

For me, the call to follow Jesus is not that simple. In following Jesus, I don't pick up and leave my home and family, or my job. That wouldn't be responsible to those who depend on me. And then there's the matter of *how* to follow. Those first disciples had Jesus right there in front of them, showing them what to do and where to go. Two thousand years later, it's not nearly so clear-cut. Beyond that, there's the plain old intimidation factor. I mean, who are we to measure up to those four original disciples, who were so decisive, so enthusiastic, so close to the Lord? What kind of disciples can we ever hope to be in comparison with them?

Surely God knows we have all these questions. And still the Savior's call comes to us through scripture in a straightforward, powerful, and inviting way: "Follow me." ... As if Jesus has more confidence in us than we do in ourselves. ...As if Jesus believes we can do it! ... As if Jesus really *wants us with him* on this path.

So let's set aside our excuses and insecurities for the time being and explore what it means for us to follow Jesus – as the people we are, in the time when we live, in the places where we are planted today.

It seems to me that following Jesus means *doing as Jesus does*.

I'm thinking back to the summer when I learned how to can tomatoes by following an expert, Aaron's mother Pat. The whole process was a complete mystery to me, but Pat had been canning tomatoes for more years than I've been alive, so it was almost second nature to her. As we went along I watched Pat's actions very carefully-- how she scalded and skinned the tomatoes, how she sterilized the jars, how she filled them with tomatoes and set the special canning lids, twisting the outer ring just fingertip tight to regulate the pressure during the sealing process. I did my best to follow each action and do as Pat did. And in the end I was rewarded by the sweetest of all sounds, that little "pop" the lid makes when a jar of tomatoes seals up tight.

This is the way we learn. We watch and follow, we do as the master-craftsperson does. If you want to learn to be a bricklayer, you apprentice to a bricklayer, you watch how they lay bricks, and you do as they do. If you want to become a teacher, you put in your hours of student teaching with someone more experienced. You watch them in action—organizing a lesson, conducting a class, relating to students—and you do as they do.

The same is true for disciples. When we follow Jesus, we do as Jesus does. We watch and learn from our Lord – in fact, that’s the root meaning of *disciple*: someone who’s in the process of learning. We learn from Jesus’ attitude and actions, and we try to make them our own. Especially we learn from scripture, where:

We see Jesus accepting all kinds of people, from fishermen to distraught mothers to army captains to prostitutes to tax collectors. And we ask what place acceptance plays in our own lives.

We see Jesus healing people and making them whole, a man with leprosy, a woman with a fever. And we ask how our lives can be dedicated to healing, in all its many forms.

We see Jesus forgiving and setting people free. And we try to put forgiveness at the center of our own relationships.

We see Jesus standing up for what is right, even when it costs him—even when it takes him to the cross—and we ask for courage to do what’s right in the situations we face.

We see how Jesus holds lightly to money and property, not grasping but sharing, multiplying the loaves and fishes so everyone can be fed. And we ask for the grace to hold lightly to our own property, to keep our perspective, and to share as generously as we can.

Following Jesus means we’re committed to let Jesus shape our lives, to let our lives look like Jesus in whatever way we can. It means we are learning from Jesus how to walk the extra mile, turn the other cheek, and love our enemies. It means we try to live like Jesus and let Jesus lead the way.

But there’s no kitchen apprentice who masters the whole tomato-canning process the first time. And no bricklayer who’s ready to start their own business after just a couple

months training. And if we get all caught up in perfectionism here, then we've missed the point.

The point is to join Jesus in living God's kingdom life. That's the spirit I hear in Christ's invitation: *The kingdom of heaven has come near... Follow me! -- and see firsthand what God can do with you, with all of us!* Following Jesus is not about being right or being perfect. Instead, it's about being in relationship with our Creator, traveling with Christ, and being part of the loving, positive, healing work God is doing.

A long time ago, a good-natured man at church gave me a little plastic pin he had made himself. On this pin there was a cartoon person he had drawn, and in hand-written, squiggly letters it said, "Please be patient. God isn't finished with me yet!" That's the spirit! I suspect he gave that pin to me because he knew how impatient I can sometimes be, especially with myself. And I know I'm not alone.

A wise Christian reminds us that being a disciple doesn't depend on our achievements. In his words, you can be a "rank, incompetent beginner" and still be called a disciple, still be in the process of learning, still be apprenticed to Jesus and following Jesus on the way. Everybody starts their learning somewhere, and nobody ever completes this course of study till that day when we are finally gathered into God's eternal glory and in God's shining presence, all distinctions melt away into everlasting praise and light. I find a lot of refreshment and hope in that.

Following Jesus doesn't mean becoming someone else, or someone different, or someone better-- perhaps like those early disciples we imagine were so impressive. Following Jesus instead means learning to *"live my life the way Jesus would live my life, if he were me."*

It means living in a Christ-like way, given our own talents and responsibilities, in our own situation today. It doesn't necessarily mean going somewhere else – like to another country to assist in earthquake or tsunami recovery (though I am really glad it's part of some people's calling to do that!). Rather, it means letting God teach all of us to be Jesus-inspired people wherever we are, and most especially the place where we are right here and now. Following Jesus is letting God's life flow through us and "learning from Jesus how to lead our life, our *whole* life, our *real* life" in God's presence and love.

(Dallas Willard article, "How to Be a Disciple," *The Christian Century*, Apr 22-29, 1998, 430-9, from the book *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God*)

And that's where the joy comes in.

Jesus calls us to follow because his way is a way of blessing, for us and for others.

Jesus calls us to follow because his way is a way of renewal, for us and for others.

Jesus calls us to follow because his way is a way of peace and hope, for us and for others.

When Jesus calls us, we receive the invitation to find our own true life, the purpose we were created for, the gift God has for us.

When we follow Jesus, we experience the life that truly is life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.