

## Follow Me

### [John 1:43-51](#)

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I must say when I saw the church sign with the sermon title on it and I see it here in the bulletin today, it gives me pause to wonder. "Follow me, Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle." That's not exactly what I had in mind! However, there is some truth to it.

When we invite people to follow Jesus, there is a sense in which they are going to follow us and be with us in that following experience. No matter what happens in life, we will follow a leader. Someone must lead. There are no followers without leaders. You, today, are following a parent, or a mentor. You are following a ghost... a memory... a boss... a hero... a president... a candidate... a friend... a counselor. You're following someone because of their passion... their expertise... their philosophy... their success... their wealth... their intelligence... their record... their goodness... their success. We all follow someone.

Louis Gerstner in his book, *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance*, makes it quite simple: leadership is personal. Great institutions are not managed -- they are led. Personal leadership is about communication, openness, and a willingness to speak often, and honestly, and with respect for the intelligence of the listener and the reader. Personal leadership is about passion.

Parents, the question for you today is: Are you leading your children into the presence of God? Or are they leading you? So many parents that I have talked to over the last several years say something like this: "I'm bringing my kids to Sunday School because I don't have a moral center in my life, but I want to make sure they have one." And I want to say to them (which I often do): "Who is your leader?" Parents do need help; they need the help of the church. But parents, the real question is: Who are you following? Because who you follow will be, by implication, who your children follow.

Louis Gerstner talks about his family and the kind of family in which he grew up: "We were a warm, tightly-knit, Catholic middle-class family," he says. "Whatever I have done well in life has been a result of my parents' influence. My father was a very private man with a great love of learning and an inner strength that needed no approbation or reinforcement from a broader audience. My mother was enormously disciplined, hard-working and ambitious for all of her children. She drove us toward excellence, accomplishment and success." He was being led by his parents, and because his parents had the courage to lead, he had the ability to lead one of the largest corporations in the world.

Who are you following today? Jan David Hettinga in his book, *Follow Me*, says the ultimate issue in the universe is leadership. Who you follow and what directs your life is the single most important thing about you. You are who you follow. You become who you follow. He also goes on to say that believing is not a spectator event, but believing leads to following. And following is what makes you a participant and a player. It is not good enough to stand back and say, "I believe." In order to follow Jesus, you must get in and participate.

It is important that we are careful who we follow. We do not want to follow people who are too angry, judgmental or condemning. We do not want to follow people who are too narrow, introverted and caged-up or trapped in their own identities. We do not want to follow people who are too biased, bigoted or preferential. We do not want to follow people who are too limited or small-minded in their thinking. We do not want to follow people who are too sentimental and fuzzy and gushy. We do not want to follow people who are just informational and stoic and distant - or people who are too defensive, boxed-in and walled-up... or too paranoid or pathological, or people who are too winded, traumatized, abused or victimized. We do not want to follow people who are too controlling, manipulative or coercive... too legalistic, pharisaic or formal... too superficial, trivial or naïve.

We want to follow someone who is whole, and healthy, and balanced. Following Jesus is about discovering

the person who is whole, healthy, and balanced. It's not just accepting Jesus and saying, "Yes, I've accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior." No, when Jesus says, "Follow me," it's about moving where Jesus wants you to go. It's not just about believing a good theology - it's about following a good person. It's not just about acknowledging that I need a god, it's about committing my life to be in the presence of God day after day. I put my whole life... my mind, my body, my emotions, my values... into submission to the pattern of life that Jesus leads me into. Or, as Paul said in Romans 12, "present your body a living sacrifice. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind..."

One who follows is one who is hungry to know, one who is deeply curious, who will seek, and knock, and ask, and listen. One who questions, and challenges, one who is willing to walk the whole journey of life with the leader. A follower is one who will risk, explore, and be "on the adventure," looking forward to the surprises, and the down times, and the up times. To follow is to be led by another will, another mind, a more powerful being.

Why would I want to follow Jesus? He wants to change the world for good. He wants to bring the kingdom of God near at hand. He wants to change me for the better. He wants to bring healing and wholeness, balance, justice, equity, integrity into this chaotic world. He wants to empower me to help the world change so I can participate in the change experience. He wants to bring peace, and reconciliation, forgiveness, truth, and grace to real human beings who are hungry for it. He wants us to love God and love one another. But most of all, he wants to show us that God loves us. I would say that it's a good risk to follow Jesus.

Once we've made that decision, and we are going in the direction Jesus wants us to go, we see in the text that there is an immediate desire to turn and invite someone else to come along. Philip seems to be the one in the Gospels and the Book of Acts who is always inviting someone else to come along: "Come and see. I've seen Jesus face-to-face; I want you to come and see Jesus face-to-face." So in our lives, we look for those who are curious and seeking, are interested and wondering, and they're looking for someone to follow. So we ask them to come along with us. We bring them to church and worship with us. We invite them over to our home, and we form a discussion group with them, and we listen to their stories, and we let them ask their questions. We ask them to "come and see."

Personal invitation is a powerful thing. It is often said that the majority of transformational experiences for human beings begin with a personal invitation to participate. Recently I was invited to evensong at the Cathedral. The questions that were asked of me by the people who invited me were: "Would you like to come with us? We'd love to have you join us at this moment. We have found this to be so helpful in our lives. We'll come and pick you up. We might even feed you! It would mean so much to us if you would go with us." Do you hear the invitation that is pervasive and persuasive there? Now what did I do? I went! Now I had my own curiosity and my own desire to know what God was doing there, but I went because I was invited.

I came here because I was invited. Someone personally invited me to come. It is important that, once we choose to follow Jesus, we are not alone in that - we turn and look at the people around us and invite them to come along with us: "Come and see."

My wife and I were invited several years ago to develop a small group ministry among Methodists. It's an awesome thing for a Presbyterian to be asked to do small groups among Methodists, since they are the "small group" denomination. What do we Presbyterians know about small groups? My wife and I knew a couple who had an open attitude about being involved with a church, and we invited them to come and be with these Methodists. Early into the conversation we began to share our lives and study the Bible together. We also began to offer prayers together. At the moment where we invited people to pray, the woman that we invited to the group said, "No way - I'm not praying out loud in this group. If I have to pray out loud in this group, I'm leaving." We said, "Relax, it's O.K. We're not going to make you pray. Is it O.K. if we pray?" "Oh sure - you can pray." Four weeks later as we're in the middle of the prayer time, she speaks up quietly and says, "I think I'm ready to pray now." And so she prayed. Two weeks after that, in the middle of the prayer time, toward the end of it she says, "I think I need to tell you why I didn't want to pray at the beginning. It's because in my family of origin, prayer was always attached - particularly the moment of prayer between parents and child - to the moment where we were being punished for

something. Our parents would say, 'let us pray,' and then beat us." Prayer was attached to abuse in her mind. She needed someone to say, "Come and see a different way to pray."

People are hungry to know that there's a healthy balanced, non-victimized approach to living life. Jesus invites us to come as we are. We invite our neighbors to come as they are. These are ordinary people. Even Jesus himself is seen as a very ordinary person (I thought Megan did a very good job when she read, "What good can come out of Nazareth"-- her personality shone through.) It is true - what good can come out of Nazareth? I mean, what is Nazareth? It's nothing. All of us are fisherman - at least we have a reputation in Bethsaida. But Nazareth - that's up there in the hills. People who deal with stone and rocks are up there. In God's eyes there's no such thing as a 'royal person' because of their blood or their attachments to a community. No, ordinary people are invited to follow Jesus, and we invite ordinary people alongside of us, and we become royalty because we are following.

I grew up in a little dirt town outside of the west side of the San Fernando Valley called Chatsworth. Chatsworth really has no reputation. Today it has the notoriety for being the pornographic center of the United States. What good can come out of Chatsworth? That's where your Senior Pastor has come from. People will rush out of here - don't leak that to the press, please! A small dirt road surrounded by orange groves, across from a ploughed field - everything was dirty. Horses came down the road and left their evidences. What good can come out of Chatsworth? I know some of you are thinking: "We're still asking that question."

Jesus calls ordinary people to follow. And because they are following, they become extraordinary people. Jesus came as an ordinary human being and is demonstrated, because of God's presence in his life and as the son of God, to be an extraordinary human being. And when Jesus begins to show that extraordinary side is when he sees Nathaniel before Nathaniel sees him.

Jesus sees us coming. If you invite somebody to come with you, Jesus already knows he's coming. And Jesus has taken a good look at this person and at you in the past, and knowing that you're coming, has some things to say to you. "Oh, Nathaniel, I saw you sitting under the fig tree." Nathaniel was blown away by that - how could this be? "You must be the Messiah if you saw me sitting under the fig tree." What do people do under fig trees? Well according to rabbinical tradition, they take time to meditate upon the Scriptures, and to pray and to ask God to lead them in life. And Jesus saw Nathaniel and the heart that he had to really had know God, underneath the fig tree.

Jesus sees us in advance. The poet Wordsworth said this about Jesus: "He saw into the depth of human souls - souls that appear to have no depth at all to careless eyes." Jesus sees the depth of who they can become. Jesus saw, in the ordinary and simple Phillip, a person who would become an evangelist and invite people to keep coming. Jesus saw in Nathaniel a person who was hungry to study and to teach, and when he had people there, he would tell them about the Son of God and about how Scripture was connected.

Jesus also recognized, in a fairly positive way, that Nathaniel was a person of skepticism, if not sarcasm - 'What good thing can come out of Nazareth?' Jesus could have been put off by that but he's attracted to it, and he says, "Well here's a person that just puts it right out there - there's no guile or deceit. He'll tell it like it is." Jesus affirmed Nathaniel even in his reticence and hesitancy.

There's another great person whom Jesus touched under a fig tree later on in history - his name was Augustine. Augustine under the fig tree was reading a book that was full of debauchery and eroticism. And as if a song came out over the limbs of the tree, said to Augustine, "read my book." And he picked up the Bible and read Romans 13, which said, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." And Augustine followed Jesus.

If we follow Jesus, it is not a short journey. It is a long journey. It is a commitment for the whole life. It is an obedience in the same direction for a lifetime. Jesus does not just say, 'make a decision and you're in.' Jesus says, "make a decision to follow, and keep following... and keep following... and keep following, until your life is changed."

So Nathaniel does. And Jesus tells Nathaniel that, if he keeps following, he will be like Jacob in the Old Testament, who was full of deceit and guile. But Jacob, in his following and his journey, came to the place where he saw a vision of God, where the angels were ascending and descending to heaven. And Jacob realized he was in the presence of God. He called the place the "house of God" - Beth-el.

One of the persons that helped me to keep following in life was my choir director in high school, by the name of Donald Gustafson. Donald Gustafson was a great tenor - he sang for Roger Wagner and for Robert Shaw and occasionally he would break out in this wonderful tenor voice and sing a high F above high C and break almost every glass in the room! And we admired him because of his expertise and the quality of person that he was. And he would often say, "Your musical passion and focus and intensity is connected to your faith. Be a person of faith and be a person in music. Watch me." And those three years with Donald Gustafson taught me to follow Jesus.

Faith is a journey and it's in stages that we experience Jesus along the way. And every stage is a little different. There are stages where we are moving up and we think we're going to go right to heaven, we're going to the mountaintop and we want to stay there for the rest of our lives. But the stages that end our journey are often downward stages... difficult stages... troubled stages... stages where darkness is pervasive, where we are tired and exhausted. Just because you are in a dark place doesn't mean that you've stopped following. It means that you may be following Jesus all the way to the cross, for that's where the following process goes for every disciple. The dark place...the hard place...the suffering...the pain...the aging...the cross.

Today we have our children showing us their Milestones as they walk in the journey. They'll lead us in the Doxology. As adults, we have our milestones. We have our stages and the stages that we must go through before we can come into the resurrection are stages of trouble, and difficulty, and pain. And what Jesus wants to say to us is, "When you are in the darkest place, follow me. When you are in the hard place... the place of grief and loss... follow me."

I received an e-mail recently from someone who is in a really tough place and they sent me this prayer. It helps them to be in this tough place and continue to walk with Jesus:

Gracious God, our sins are too heavy to carry. They're too real to hide. And they're too deep to undo. Forgive what our lips tremble to name and what our hearts can no longer bear and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment. Set us free from a past that we cannot change and open us to a future in which we can be changed. And grant us grace to grow more and more in your likeness and image, through Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

That's a prayer for someone who's been on the journey a long time and they're not going to give up. Jesus says, "Follow me, particularly when times are tough." You may be in a dark place today. You may be in a place where you have disillusionment and frustration, where you live in anxiety. Follow Jesus in that hard place.

We want to see Jesus. Remember that the ascending and descending of angels between heaven and earth is most fully seen on the cross of Jesus, which is suspended between heaven and earth. It is on the cross that we see the most powerful demonstration of God's love, and what it means to follow all the way.

Lord, give us the courage to follow Jesus to the cross, and into the resurrection.

Amen.