

Following Jesus

Mark 1:14-20

Dr. Harry Winsheimer
Sunday, January 22, 2006
Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

The pinch-preacher is back! Dr. Icenogle worked on Monday, and was sick on Tuesday. He taught on Wednesday evening and worked on Friday. Yesterday, he phoned and was very apologetic that he had to ask me again to preach. He has struggled to regain his vitality since Christmas. Let's offer a prayer for him: "Lord, Gareth has been sick too much and too long. As Jesus touched the blind man and he was healed, touch Gareth. Restore your servant. Bring him back strong. In the name of the Great Physician, Amen."

Gareth's text for today is from the first chapter of Mark. Mark is the briefest gospel. It is straight-forward. No extra words. No embellishment. We hear this in his introductory sentence: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. No birth story. No worshipping shepherds. No wise men bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh. No genealogy. No Joseph. No Mary. Immediately Mark announces that John the Baptizer fulfills the prophesy of Malachi. Before Mark tells us the Good News that God has for us in Jesus, he wants us to know that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is a continuation of God's relationship with us. God is writing a new chapter, the key chapter, the good news chapter, in a continuing story of God's interaction with humanity. Fulfilling the prophesy, John appears, baptizes and proclaims that someone greater than he will be coming.

Jesus shows up. John baptizes Jesus. Just as [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit [of God] descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased." Then the Spirit drives, compels, Jesus to a place in the wilderness for forty days where Satan tests him. I believe that those forty days are crucial for Jesus. Those are rough days. He comes out of the crisis with a settled comprehension of who he is and his role. Now he understands the meaning of being named Jesus, understands the significance of the title Christ, understands the idiom for himself as the Son of God. He has rejected satanic missions. He has internalized who God sent him to be. Then, he 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." (All of that is described in fourteen verses.)

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—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.

As Jesus passed by on Nebraska Avenue, he saw people sitting in church, singing and praying. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you catch people for God."

Do you follow Jesus? Will you follow Jesus? There is no question more significant! Saying, "Yes," to a marriage proposal is not as defining. Accepting a position with a company is not as far reaching. Your eternal salvation depends upon your accepting Jesus as your Lord and Savior. What you do with your time and money will reflect his presence. He calls to you. Have you yielded? Have you swallowed your pride and welcomed into yourself his love? Have you knelt at his feet and released your guilt and shame to him for absolution? Have you accepted Jesus as the most powerful influence on your values? Have you surrendered your will for instruction and guidance? Do you know the deep at-ease feeling, the sense of being loved, the peace of being right with God through your relationship with Jesus?

I admire these four: Peter and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John. They dropped what they were doing and followed. They had no idea where Jesus would take them. They trusted. They were courageous.

And, they were naïve. I wonder if they thought, "Well, fishing is poor, and Dad and the hired men can handle it. We are curious about this guy. He sounds like he knows what he is talking about. We'll be back tomorrow, Dad." The Gospel writers later reported that the disciples had no concept of what they were getting into. For the next three years, Jesus would be their coach-teacher. Following Jesus would be an incredible adventure.

If you don't want to venture into different relationships and tasks, then tell Jesus, "No thanks! I'll do my thing." But if you say, "Yes," to Jesus, I guarantee that Jesus will take you outside of your comfort zone, and you will do things that you don't expect. Take Peter for example. Did Peter anticipate that he would witness Jesus being arrested, that he would lie about knowing Jesus, and curse to convince people that he was not a follower? And, did Peter anticipate that he would become the leader of the followers of Jesus, and that Jesus would commission him to "feed my sheep"? Are you going with Jesus?

I would not be surprised if many of you said, "Yes, I follow Jesus. Sort of. Sometimes. Well, not like Jesus would want to me to." Welcome to the Peter, Andrew, James and John Club!

Is it fascinating that Jesus called this kind of people? These are the very first people whom he asks to follow him. They will become his lieutenants. But, they are fishermen! There is not a Ph.D. among them. None have written anything. They come from villages on the shore of a little lake in no-man's world. They have no credentials. None whatsoever! No power. None. No prestige. None. No fame. None. What are they good at? Fishing! Now there is the qualification to change the world!

Folks, it is not the superior competency which we bring to the table that makes us attractive to Jesus. Remember Mary and the Annunciation? In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth. Would you have heard of Galilee or Nazareth, if it were not for this story? The virgin's name was Mary. The angel told her that she had been chosen to bear the Son of God. Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Mary was a teen-aged girl in a man's world! But, she brought willingness to follow.

What did I bring to the table in 1958? I was short and slight, normal intelligence, no money, nothing that put me into Who's Who. Yet Jesus called me to be a Minister of Word and Sacrament! It was nothing that I offered, except perhaps one trait: willingness to follow. I was called for the purpose of being a minister of Word and Sacrament. Mary was called to bear Jesus. Peter, Andrew, James and John were called to fish for people. They would be his messengers, telling the story of Jesus and calling others to follow him. What did they bring to Jesus? Willingness. They left their nets and went with Jesus.

Willingness---Jesus will create other needed traits in us. Jesus calls. Are you going with Jesus?

At times Jesus calls us to a specific work.

Nancy was one of the secretaries of my last congregation. Her mother was very ill; she had been for a long time. Physically she could do very little. Nancy and her husband had to help out almost daily. Care of her mother was Nancy's particular call. She did it for her mother; she did it for Jesus! During a staff meeting one day, one of us asked what her mother did all day. Nancy quoted her mother, "I pray all day. I can't do much, but I can pray." Prayer was her mother's specific calling.

Some of us, at times, are invited to particular tasks. Jesus invites everyone. And sometimes he calls individuals to a particular role or work. To these four, he promised to make them fish for people. They would tell the story of Jesus, and call people to follow Jesus. I walk in their footsteps as I call you to follow Jesus.

Have you in the past responded positively to Jesus' call to a particular work? Are you currently?

Now, I want to explore with you how to know if the call, the invitation, to a specific work is from God.

I visited often a woman who suffered for years from mental illness. Episodes would come and go. Psychiatrists labeled her bi-polar. One afternoon, I visited her in her house. She was in a passive state, having rarely been out of bed for the past two weeks. And when she did get up, she scoured the house, moving everything, searching for slips of paper. She found slips behind the sofa, under chairs, in the kitchen cabinets, in her bed. These were messages from God for her to share. She was absolutely convinced that God was speaking to the world through her. In fact, she was angry because no one paid any attention to her. "God is using me! People must listen!" Of course, the family never found any slips.

The first test of the authenticity of God's call to a specific work is confirmation by other Christians. The Apostle Paul advised the church in Thessalonica, "Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything...." I Thessalonians 5:21 John wrote, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God...." I John 4:1

In the Presbyterian Church, we test. When I felt the inner call of God to be a minister, the church's elders interviewed me. They concluded that I could have a real call from God. Then the regional body, the presbytery, had ministers and elders work with me for three years. A church called me, the presbytery formally examined me, and finally the presbytery confirmed my call. (There was another man whom the presbytery refused to confirm for Ministry of Word and Sacrament. They advised him to serve the Lord in another capacity.) This is still the practice. All who believe that they are called to Ministry of Word and Sacrament must have their call confirmed by other Christians.

Do other Christians support me in this work? An affirmative answer to that question is a must.

A second test question is: Is the work to which I am called consistent with Scripture? The work must not contradict the teaching of Scripture. It should be harmonious with Scriptural teaching and examples.

I recall a conversation with a Hari Krishna disciple dressed in flowing robe who begged money from me. They used to be in airports and road intersections with their hands out. One Hari Krishna justified begging by telling me that they beg, just like Jesus taught people to beg. Maybe you are as surprised as I to hear that Jesus taught people to beg. The passage to which the man referred is in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

These twelve men were sent out by Jesus with following instructions: "Go and preach, 'the Kingdom of heaven is near.'" You have received without paying, so give without being paid. Do not carry any gold, silver, or copper money in your pockets; do not carry a beggar's bag for the trip or an extra shirt or shoes or a walking stick. A worker should be given what he needs." Matthew 10:5-10

Where was a donation to Hari Krishna going? To build one of the most magnificent structures that I have ever seen! A temple in West Virginia. They called it their "Palace of Gold" because it was overlaid with gold. Jesus never told us to beg! Begging was the opposite of his intention. Jesus expected his followers to work. In the case of Peter, Andrew, James and John, their work was telling people about Jesus. The Apostle Paul supported himself by making tents in order not to burden anyone. There is no blessing on begging per se in the Bible. Therefore, by the second test, the Hari Krishna teaching was heresy. It is not the call of Jesus, because it is not consistent with Scripture. Test. Confirm that a specific work is really from Jesus.

Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Jesus calls every one of you to follow him. Are you following? Jesus calls some of you today to a particular work. Are you doing it?
Follow him!