

## “Follow Me”

First Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Dave Carlson  
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**Old Testament lesson:** Psalm 62:5-12

**New Testament lesson:** Mark 1:14-20

It was the first day of work for a group of about 25 newly hired associates at the Wall Street firm Goldman Sachs. Bolstered by their brand new MBA degrees, they gathered for a “get to know each other” session. Each associate was asked to tell a little about his or her personal background.

One guy, who was obviously a little older than some of his new colleagues, stood up and gave his rather impressive background. He had been a Ranger in the Army and had led the brigade that took over Noriega’s palace in Panama. He was actually injured in the raid and received some kind of medal. After retiring from the Army, he had run for a congressional seat, but lost the election. He then decided to go to business school, and now here he is at Goldman Sachs.

The next guy who stood up had that “rather tough act to follow.” With an inner confidence that comes from telling it like it is, he said, “Basically, I watched TV all my life. But the way I see it, I’m now in the same position as he is,” pointing to his colleague from the Army.

The disciples of Jesus all had different backgrounds – different skills and interests that ranged from fisherman to wealthy tax collector and everything in between. Last week we asked the question – How did Jesus attract his earliest disciples? – and we saw that it was because Jesus is the Messiah, the savior they had been looking for down through history, fully God, and fully human, and as such, Jesus is our connection to God, bridging heaven and earth.

Today, we look at who the earliest disciples were, what it took for them to follow Jesus, AND what that means for us as followers of the Lord in this day and age. Jesus is going through Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

I don’t know about you, but I’m all for the part about the “good news of God” and the “kingdom of God” drawing near,” and then I realize that, as our Prayer of Confession says on Page 4 of your bulletin, the coming of God’s kingdom means “the present form of this world is passing away,” AND hey! I live in and I’m attached to the present form and function of the world as we know it.

Whereas the world that God envisions – the world that is coming into being as God’s kingdom draws nearer – that world I don’t fully know or understand. Nobody does.

But I do know that living in Christ means dying to the world around us. It means giving up that part of ourselves that clings to earthly possessions, that part of ourselves resigned to live in a world of opposition and sadness, groping in the darkness for the light of Christ's peace and joy to break through, fighting the temptation to make things about me and my needs even at the expense of others.

It's not easy to live in Christ. And while none of us does it perfectly, we are all called to do it, together, as best we can, counting on the Spirit of God's grace and mercy to see us through. What does it take to be that type of disciple of Jesus? To live in the world, but not of the world, not so attached to things as they are that we miss out on things as they are becoming, by the power of God's Spirit?

We see what it takes to be a disciple of Jesus where he says, "... Repent, and believe in the good news." As we've just seen, it's hard to believe in the good news of God's kingdom drawing near when faced with all the terrible things going on in this world. And as for repenting, who wants to do that? Repenting means not only saying "I'm sorry," but actually changing who we are, and that's never fun; that always takes work, a lifetime of work.

How can we possibly respond faithfully to Jesus' call to repent and believe?!? In doing that, I like to think of "repent" as "turning" and "believe" as "following" – as in "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; (turn from what you're up to), and (follow Jesus)." Turn and follow – that I can do! Jesus calls to each of us saying, "Turn from what you're doing and follow me."

Ask yourself, are you willing and able to turn and follow Jesus. It's the same as repent and believe, and it makes a lot more sense to me, more everyday language. Also, it's easy to make that decision. Either you're willing to turn and follow Jesus or you're not.

It's like the guy on a flight to Texas who was asked by the flight attendant if he would like dinner. "What are my choices," he asked. "Yes or no," she replied. Turning and following Jesus is not a choice we can easily make if we think about all that it entails – all the aspects of our lives that are turned upside down when we become a follower of Jesus. But if we make it a simple yes-or-no question moment by moment, then yes, we can do that – we can follow Jesus one step at a time.

We see this in today's New Testament Lesson where after being called by Jesus, Simon and Andrew, James and John turn from what they are doing at the moment and immediately follow Jesus. They don't stop to think about every aspect of their lives that will be turned upside down. They follow.

In that moment, they follow Jesus, turning from whatever it is was that might hold them back, whatever they are preoccupied with at the time. Now, what they were preoccupied with at the time just happened to be their occupation, their jobs. Simon

and Andrew were casting their nets and James and John were repairing theirs – alongside their father who they leave behind.

This shows us just what we might face as followers of Jesus. A person's job and family was everything – is everything. We have to be willing and ready to lay it all on the line everyday as a follower of Jesus. To do that, it's helpful to know what being a follower of Jesus means. Jesus says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

In other words, being a follower of Jesus means bringing others closer to God through Jesus Christ. Again, something that doesn't sound too hard, but in practice, it takes constant diligence. We constantly need to be thinking whether our words and actions truly reflect the light of Christ – the grace and mercy of the Lord – or instead, do they show us and others just how far we have yet to go as a follower of Jesus.

The best way for us to be followers of Jesus is by showing each other the same care and compassion he shows; standing up for the truth; embracing and loving others despite their limitations; freeing people from what holds them back; equipping others for the work and ministry of the Lord; trusting in Jesus and worshiping God.

None of us is able to live perfectly into that calling. We all fall short. But together – we are the body of Christ – the hands and feet and heart of Jesus – and when one of us falls short, the others take up the slack, confident in God's ability to do far more than we could ever hope or imagine.

It's like what Gregg Levoy writes in his book titled "Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life:

He says, "It makes perfect sense that we should be called to go beyond our limits, because the One that calls us is beyond all limits. I suspect," says Levoy, "that all the energy we have bound up in resisting our own potential is more energy than we'll need to reach it. It takes as much energy to fail as it does to succeed." So how do we muster the energy – the courage and focus – to turn away from what we're doing and follow Jesus, to make better choices for our lives and our world?

Levoy has a suggestions for that, too, where he says, "... The degree of resistance is probably proportionate to the amount of power waiting to be unleashed and the satisfaction to be experienced once the 'no' breaks through to 'yes' and the call is followed."<sup>1</sup> So, there you have it. Ours is not to figure out the entirety of the call that the Lord puts upon our lives as followers of Jesus. Ours is merely to follow, step by step, and do the next right thing, with God's help. Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Gregg Levoy, *Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life* (Harmony, 1998).

## PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, our lives reach out in ever-widening circles; bless us in each one of them.

Bless us in our homes and help us to honor all that we give and receive there.

Bless us in our work and help us to never need to be ashamed of anything we do.

Bless us in our communities, and help us to put as much and more into the life of the community as we take out.

Bless us in our church, where we seek to worship with gladness and to serve the church with whatever gifts we have.

Bless us in our country and help us to be good citizens.

Bless us in the world, and bring the nations together in peace.

We pray, too, for the health and welfare of our friends and loved ones – and even ourselves – and especially for those recovering from illness or injury and those who grieve a loss.

Bring them comfort, Lord, and lead them out of any pain and darkness to those moments of joy and light that you shine into our lives, even in our greatest need.

We pray all this in your name, O Lord, remembering the words that you taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**