

**January 22, 2023. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis**

Let us pray. God of epiphanies, you reveal yourself to us in diverse and numerous ways. Free us from the distractions that turn our focus away from you and your Word. Open us to the truth you reveal to us today. Amen.

Our scripture for today comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 4, verses 12 through 23. Listen now for the Word of the Lord.

<sup>12</sup> Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. <sup>13</sup> He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup> so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: <sup>15</sup> “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles — <sup>16</sup> the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” <sup>17</sup> From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>18</sup> As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers. <sup>19</sup> And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” <sup>20</sup> Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. <sup>22</sup> Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. <sup>23</sup> Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

A big part of my childhood was sports. I loved playing sports. I know that experience is not unique to me. A lot of us played sports in our formative years because of all that we learn from playing sports. How to be part of a team, perseverance, dedication, responsibility, accountability, importance of practice, and leadership. Especially leadership.

Arguably one of the most powerful things I’ve learned about leadership, I learned from an old soccer coach who taught us the ‘first follower’ concept. The first follower concept is exactly what it says – it’s about the importance of the first person to follow.

At the core of this concept is the reality that a leader isn’t a leader until someone follows them. Listens to them. Followers their lead – which is crucial in team sports. To work as a team, you must have a leader yes, but more importantly, people have to follow.

The first follower concept originated from a 3-minute ted talk by Derek Sivers called “How to Start a Movement.”

In this talk, Sivers shows a video of a man dancing alone on a concert grass lawn on a summer day. There are people all around, but no one else is dancing, until one person gets up and starts dancing with him. The man welcomes him and shows him his dance moves and they dance together and then the newcomer calls his friends to join. His 3 or so friends come over –

he shows them the dance moves – and they all keep dancing. And then suddenly, more and more people join until it's this big crowd all dancing and now if you're not dancing, you're the odd man out.

Sivers argues that this movement wasn't really started by the guy dancing by himself on the lawn – but instead it was started when the first follower came up and joined him. It was the first follower that transformed the weird guy dancing by himself into a leader – thus showing that the first follower in an underestimated form a leadership itself. And a crucial role in starting a movement.

Today, we join Jesus as he begins his public ministry. The synoptic gospels all agree that it's after John's arrest that Jesus begins his ministry. Why? We don't really know. But it shows again how connected John the Baptist and Jesus are.

Perhaps Jesus knew this too and when he saw John arrested, he knew he was running out of time and was brought to action. He begins his ministry by continuing the message John first preached - "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

But for his ministry to grow, he needs disciples. He cannot do it all alone, people must follow.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus calls his first disciples in a rather astounding way. He says follow me, and they do. It's that simple. These first disciples were fishermen.

He first sees Simon Peter and Andrew and right as they are casting a net out into the sea he calls out to them – follow me! – and immediately they do.

They don't wait to finish – they leave their nets behind – a foundation of their business – and follow Jesus. This man they don't know. They drop their tangible means of livelihood right into the ocean.

Jesus next comes across James and John mending their nets in the boat with their father. When Jesus calls out, they immediately leave their father behind in the boat in order to follow. Again, follow this man they don't know.

They gave up everything – their businesses, their families, their lives as they knew it, just to follow.

They aren't given any more information, they don't know where they are going or what they are doing or what's going to happen, but still they follow.

It was a call of radical obedience. But they did it. The disciples famously have terrible reputations in the gospels. They mess up at what seems like every turn. And then they betray Jesus when he needed them the most.

But it's easy to look down on them and judge them and think we would do better because we forget they were the first ones to follow Jesus.

They messed up so much because they weren't given roadmap or handbook on how to be a disciple.

They were figuring it out as they went along. There were no other disciples to teach them how to be a disciple – they were it. And what if they hadn't followed?

What if they hadn't dropped their nets immediately and left it all behind to obey Jesus' command to follow? Maybe the next person would have answered the call, but then again maybe not. It was a ridiculous call to answer. What if no one had followed?

Because of those first disciples, we have much to be grateful for.

In his Ted Talk, Siverson teaches that new followers who join a movement after the first follower don't emulate the leader – they emulate the first follower.

Those first disciples messed up so much so that they could model for us how to be disciples, how to follow.

And from them we learn what to do, and what not to do. But more importantly, we learn that as we try and mess up along the long road of discipleship, Christ will still always meet us where we are. Ultimately, we learn from these first disciples what Discipleship is...to follow.

While the actual act of following was hard and costly for the disciples, giving up the comfort of their lives in an instant, they knew exactly who to follow. Christ incarnate was right there before their eyes, and following Christ, for them, meant literally following this man right before their eyes.

It's not so easy for us. We may answer the call – “follow me” – rather easily, but it's harder to follow Christ when he is not physically right in front of us.

We have a lot of voices calling out to us every day. With technology we are more accessible than ever, and so it is hard to discern through all the chatter to figure out which voice really is Christ's who calls out to us – follow me. People have done horrific things claiming to be Christ's voice, so we have every right to be cautious.

But it's our job, our responsibility, to be able to know Christ's voice among the clutter, among the chaos. The last verse of our scripture for today shows us how.

After Jesus calls those first disciples, verse 23 states “Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”

To discern the voice of God, we must examine the person behind the voice. The one who calls out “follow me” is the one who brings liberation to those who need it the most.

To worship Christ, we understandably focus so much on his death and resurrection – because it's the gift of resurrection that gives us eternal life with God – life that is not broken even in death.

But to follow Christ – we need to turn to his life. Christ first preaches “repent, for the kingdom of Heaven has come near.” That kingdom is the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven – it’s the kingdom that’s breaking in here and now – and we break down the doors for it to come in when we do as those first disciples did – follow in the footsteps of Christ’s life. Spreading good news, teaching, bringing liberation.

Those first disciples Jesus called that day were simple fisherman. Fishermen were among the lower ranks of society. They were obligated to the roman empire. The fish they caught wasn’t their own – it was the empire’s. So, they would have had to catch fish for themselves and the empire and pay tax on it all.

Their work was hard and physical, and after working long hours they were dirty and unclean and smelled. Yet Christ called them just as they were. Right there in that moment... dirty and tired. Because the only thing Christ demanded from them was to follow. They didn’t need better social standing or more money or clean clothes. The disruptive, radical call affirmed that who they were now is all that they needed.

And, it’s these fisherman that too, changed the world. Changed it when they dropped their nets.

Sivers closes his ted talk by saying quote “Its’s the first follower that transformed the lone nut into a leader.”

Christ stood alone in many ways – his radical message of liberation to not only Israel, but the whole world – was ridiculous at the time – it still is. But he believed in it – so much so that he didn’t wait for others to come to him – he sought them out. But those first people who answered his call to follow him – Simon peter and Andrew, James and john – they made him a leader. And they brought in their friends and taught others how to follow, and we see its effects in that we’re sitting here today.

To answer God’s call, “follow me”, is a gift that changes the world. It’s daunting, to be sure, but we give thanks for those fishermen. Who followed first to teach us how. They got things right and wrong – but in their whole journey each step of the way we are affirmed that God calls out to us right now as we are. and who we are right now is enough to join in and break open those door for God’s kingdom to break through. Amen.