

January 24, 2021

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Follow Me!
Mark 1:14-20

Opening words: According to the Revised Common Lectionary this the Third Sunday after the Epiphany. The Gospel reading for today comes from the Gospel of Mark. The historic setting of these words is worth noting. In the year 64 AD, Nero was Emperor of the Roman Empire. It was during his reign Rome was devastated by a massive fire. The truth be told, Nero was to blame, but the Christian community was blamed. For this reason, Christian persecutions became a reality. The Gospel of Mark was written to encourage the believers to hold fast to the faith. The major theme of the Gospel, written in 70AD, by a close friend of Peter, John Mark, is discipleship. That is the theme found in our reading for today, Mark 1:14-20. Let me call this message *Follow Me!*

Mark 1:14-20 14After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" 16As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 17"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." 18At once they left their nets and followed him. 19When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. 20Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

In None of These Diseases S.I. McMillen tells a story of a young woman who wanted to go to college. However, her heart sank when she read the question on the application, "Are you a leader?" Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst. To her surprise, she received this letter of acceptance from the college:

Dear Applicant:

A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower.

Welcome!

I must ask you this question. Do you consider yourself a leader or do you consider yourself a follower? Jesus is looking for followers. That takes us to our Gospel lesson for today.

We find ourselves today in the first chapter of Mark. It is early in Jesus's ministry. The only things prior to this story are the stories of John the Baptist, and the baptism and temptations of Jesus. Our scripture reading begins with the sad news, John the Baptist had been arrested. His incarceration signals the beginning of Jesus's earthly ministry. Verse 15 is significant. Jesus, himself, says, *"The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"* The first thing Jesus does is collect a few followers. Jesus is at the Sea of Galilee. I have been there. It is a beautiful place, 14 miles long and 6 miles wide. The coast was filled with professional fishermen and it still is. Two of the professionals were Peter and his brother, Andrew. Jesus invites them to follow him. Later, he invites John and his brother, James. The four, in the end, decide to follow Jesus. Do not jump over that line too fast. The four follow Jesus. That means the four let Jesus take the lead. At this point, Jesus is not looking for them to be leaders, Jesus is looking for followers. That is an amazing concept in our time because we are always looking for leaders.

Over the past few decades my desk has been covered with a variety of workshops and continuing education events on the topic of leadership. In most cases the church has borrowed business principles to solve our leadership vacuum. Years ago, the name Peter Drucker (1909-2005) burst on the scene. He was an Austrian management consultant, educator, and author. Everyone seemed to be reading him. He tried to cultivate the leader hiding within all of us. He said a leader must trumpet the organization's goal and hold fast to five basic qualities. These five qualities are the secret to turning you into a leader. Here is the five:

- (1) A leader works
- (2) A leader sees his assignment as responsibility, not privilege
- (3) A leader wants strong, capable, self-assured, independent associates
- (4) A leader creates human energies and vision
- (5) A leader develops followers' trust by his own consistency and integrity

How many of those qualities do you possess in your life?

I think, it is humorous that the church had to look to Peter Drucker to teach us about leadership when we have had studying the greatest leader in the history of the world for generations, Jesus! If you do not believe me take those five qualities of leadership and apply them to Jesus.

- (1) Jesus was not afraid to work
- (2) Jesus saw his assignment as responsibility, not privilege
- (3) Jesus looked for independent associates
- (4) Jesus cast a vision
- (5) Jesus created trust because he was a person of integrity

The question for today is not, was Jesus a leader? The question is, are you a follower? Years ago, Jesus invited Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow him. They accepted the invitation and it change their lives. The problem is everyone is not comfortable following. The reason is simple. The reason is change. Some do not like change. Followers must change. Leaders do not have to change. Think about this for a moment. Many say they follow Jesus, but they refuse to change. If you do not change then you are not a follower. What is your story? So, let me ask you the questions again. Are you a follower, who will take direction from the leader? Are you a leader, who refuses to change? Jesus is looking for followers.

Today, I want to talk about three changes you must make in your life if you are going to be a follower of Jesus Christ. These points are not original. They came from United Methodist preacher James W. Moore (1938-2019). He was a graduate of the Methodist Theological School of Ohio. They are worth examining. If you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"**

A New Focus

I remember reading this piece of scripture when I was young. I wondered how the disciples could instantly leave everything and follow Jesus. Mark does not give us any prior history the disciples had with Jesus, they just left. At that time in my life, it did not seem logical, or responsible. However, as I have grown older, I have grown to understand why they did it. I believe, they accepted Jesus' invitation because they needed something new in their lives. Their lives had grown stale, and they hungered for change. You can say they wanted an adventure. Time reminded them that life in this world is limited. They wanted to leave this world a better place. Jesus offers his followers a new focus. If you are going to follow Jesus, then be prepared for a new focus. The temporary is no longer vital. The eternal suddenly becomes all consuming. How important is eternity to you?

It is interesting only John died of old age. Some believe he lived to be 100. The other three, Peter, Andrew, and James, died as martyrs. Tradition tells us, Peter died in Rome. He was crucified upside down at his request. He was not worthy to die as Jesus died. Andrew was also crucified in died in day Russia. He was crucified too. James was stoned and clubbed to death in present day Syria. The other eight did not fare much better. Thomas was in India where he was pierced through the side by four solders. Philip went to North Africa and was tortured. Bartholomew was martyred in Ethiopia. Simon the Zealot traveled to Persia and was killed for not worshipping the sun god. Just think about it. Eleven of the twelve died of unnatural causes for the Gospel. Not even one complained because their eyes were fixed on eternity. They are had a new focus. Their eyes were fixed on eternity. Are you more concerned about the temporary? Are you more concerned about the eternal? Where are your eyes fixed? If that makes you think say, **"Amen!"** If you are going to be a follower of Jesus Christ, then you better be prepared for a new focus. If you are going to be a follower of Jesus Christ, then you better be prepared for a new future.

A New Vision

Do you have someone in your life that will not let you forget the past? It may be a mother or a father. It may be a brother or a sister? It may be a friend. Is there someone in your life you hate seeing because they are constantly reminding you of your mistakes or failures? Maybe this is a better question, how much time do you spend resenting your past?

William Glasser (1925-2013) was an American psychiatrist who made his impact on the world of psychiatry. He has developed something called "reality therapy." His approach is a little blunt, but it sounds good to me. While most of the fields of psychiatry spend a great amount of time untangling your past. For example, why you hate your mother and why you resent your brother. Reality therapy spends time on your future. It says you have the rest of your life to live, get over your past and do something with your future. Do you spend too much time in your past? Do you have someone in your life who spends too much time living in the past? Wouldn't you like to tell them to get over it and start living today?

Jesus may have been the first reality therapist. Have you ever noticed how little time Jesus spent talking about the past? He is much more interested in the future. When he found the woman in the adulterous relationship, he forgives her and says, "Sin no more." (John 8:11) When Nicodemus appeared on that dark night with the question Jesus told him to move forward in life. You must be born again. (John 3:3) In the parable of the prodigal son the young brother messed up but they father accepts him back and has a party. (Luke 15:11-31) Jesus is not interested in your past. The same is true for you. He is more interested in what you are going to do in the future than what you did in the past. When you learn to completely follow Jesus you can expect a new future. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" If you are going to be a follower of Jesus Christ, then you better be prepared for a new focus. If you are going to be a follower of Jesus Christ, then you better be prepared for a new future. If you are going to be a follower of Jesus Christ, then you better be prepared for a new lifestyle.

A New Lifestyle

In February of 2016 18-year-old Malachi Love-Robinson was arrested in in West Palm Beach, Florida for pretending to be a doctor. He impersonated an anesthesiologist at the St. Mary's Medical Center. He was found guilty on 14 charges and served three and a half years in prison. I find that story interesting because the one thing people will not tolerate is a fraud. Our society values people who are genuine. It is especially true of the Christian community. Our society will not tolerate a hypocrite.

Our society is extremely critical of the church and our society is extremely critical of individual Christians. That means your world is watching you to see if you are a genuine follower of Jesus Christ. Four times in the New Testament says we are Christ's ambassadors in this world. That means you are representing Jesus. What are you

teaching your world about Jesus from your behavior? What are you teaching your world about Jesus from your attitudes or opinions? What are you teaching your world about Jesus from your words? Jesus loved everyone unconditionally. Jesus forgave everyone regularly. How are you doing serving as Christ's ambassador in this world?

Let me ask you these two questions. You can consider them a test of your genuineness. What have you said about our new president in the last few days? What have you said about our former president in the last few days? Remember, you are an ambassador of Jesus Christ? Are you a follower who is embracing a new lifestyle, always forgiving, and always loving, or are you a leader who refuses to change? Jesus loved everyone. Jesus forgave regularly. If you have some work to do say, "**Amen!**" The great reformer Martin Luther said it best, *"A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing."* On this inauguration week, let me end with this patriotic story.

In 1789, an uncertain George Washington (1732-1799) was urged to seek the presidency of the United States by Gouverneur Morris (1752-1816). Morris was a man of great influence. He was a delegate from New York to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787. From 1792-1794, he served as the Ambassador to France. From 1800-1803, he served as a United States Senator. He saw Washington as a natural leader. Morris wrote Washington these words: *"No constitution is the same on paper and in life. The exercise of authority depends upon personal character. Your cool steady temper is needed to set the tone for a new government."*

Here is the good news for today! No one is asking you to be the president. (Aren't you glad?) No one is even asking you to be a leader. The only thing I am going to ask you to do is be a follower. Follow Jesus and experience life as God intended from the very beginning. When you learn to follow Jesus, you will discover a new focus, a new future, and a new lifestyle. How much has the Gospel changed your life? So, let me ask you the question of the day one more time. Are you a leader? Are you a follower? Jesus is looking for followers. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"