

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Sunday January 21, 2018 Epiphany 3B  
Occasion: Baptism of Thaddeus Porter and Samuel Ripley  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren  
Text: Mark 1: 14-20  
Theme: What does following really mean?

All he really said was "Follow me" and they followed it was just as simple and just as complicated as that. As one commentator put it, "If we think its simplicity sounds a little improbable – if we are inclined to question whether these simple fisherfolk would have made such an overwhelming decision so instantaneously and on the basis of what looks like such meager incentive – then we are forgetting that this is the way that we almost always make our overwhelming decisions. It is the comparatively minor decisions that take all the time and fuss." You know the decisions we agonize over, who to invite over for dinner or where to take our family vacation, or what type of car is really the right one. These kinds of decisions require lots of deliberation and if they get really sticky lists of pros and cons and endless conversations with friends.

However, with the really big decisions of life – Do I really love her enough to ask her to marry me? I am I willing to give my life to this? Or is this worth dying for? With these kinds of decisions, it is rarely the pros and cons list or endless decisions with others that really matter. Not so much because they wouldn't help but because there is actually more of you involved in the decision, it is more of a whole life decision, it's a decision that we have to feel in our bones because it involves all of us, heart, mind and will. And the simple truth of the matter is that the deeper and bigger the decision the more surprising and spontaneous they often are. We make these big decisions quickly. Sometimes they knock us for loops like a sneaker wave, even though our hearts may have been working them out for months or years.

And this is what seems to have happened to Simon and Andrew and James and John. There they were handling their nets just like any other day on the shores of the Galilee and then in a moment a stranger invites them, summons them to an adventure and their heart goes out to the call or to the stranger immediately. There is a giddy sense of freedom in this passage, a kind of reckless abandon that often accompanies the real callings of our life. Of all the 10,000 ways you could go you have chosen this way. Strangely, when it happens we don't often find ourselves looking over our shoulders, missing the feel of the nets that once held us, we just walk right out of one life and start following the way we have chosen or perhaps we should say more properly, the way that has chosen us.

The result of course is never sure. Sometimes it takes quite a while to know if the choice was right (whatever that really means), but if you do get to that point you begin to feel as if you did not in fact act on some sort of moment of lunacy but instead believe that the choice you made was something that you'd been preparing for all your life, that the

words you spoke or the actions you took were in fact a fulfillment of something you were meant for – Yes I am willing to spend my life on this or Yes, I love you.

“Follow me, so, there they are, those powerful words that evoked a surprising response in the four fishermen on the shores of the Galilee. They are dangerous words and we all know very well that following them can take you places you never dreamed of going and in fact may have never wanted to go. So, the words are there, “Follow Me,” just dangling in the air and what will happen is anyone’s guess. Eventually your life, your feet will answer the question. But first is it more likely that we will begin to ask a multitude of questions. Follow? Follow where? For how long? What will I get out of it? Will it be safe or dangerous?

And then there is an even more important question of Who? Who is this that beckons me to follow? The truth is that we would like to know who this one is that summons us before we decide to get on the path with him? And that is all well and good but absolutely impossible. We all want to know the one we are interested in spending our life with before we make the decision but there is no way to know one fully without making the commitment, there is no way to know one without spending your life with them. The truth is that we cannot know this one who calls us to follow without first deciding to follow him. This is the only way to begin to know who he is. As anyone can tell you, “You do not first come to understand a person fully and then to love them, but love comes first, and then it is out of that love that understanding emerges. It is love that fires the heart and then leads to understanding and deeper knowledge.

And this, I think, is closer to what happened for these four fishermen long ago. I believe that as Jesus passed by Simon and Andrew there was something electric in the air, they sensed that Jesus loved them. I don’t know how or why or what the look on his face was but somehow, they understood that this intriguing itinerant rabbi loved them. And that was enough for them, it created the opening for them to get up and leave their nets and follow him.

The strangest thing of course is that they did it. They went along with him without any questions asked. They simply dropped their nets and went the way he was going. And we want to give them all sorts of credit as if they decided something but the truth it is rather more like something happened to them, something almost beyond their control.

It was, I suppose, more like a miracle than it was some sort of superhuman magnanimous decision to become a disciple. It might just be that this story itself is not so much about our own personal decisions as it is about the Miracle of God being able to summon us into his own ways. Yes, perhaps that is it. This is not so much a story about amazing decision-making skills on behalf of humans but rather about the power of God, the goodness of God to walk right up to us and create faith in us where no faith existed before. This is a story about God’s power to create disciples where there were none just moments ago.

This is a story about God's ability not only to call us into discipleship but also to create within us the desire, the ability to follow. Why do we follow? I think we follow for the same reasons that those four-fisherman followed Jesus long ago on the sand of Galilee. We follow because we cannot take our eyes off the one who calls us, because he interests us more than anything else in our lives, because he seems to know what we are thirsty for and to our parched and weary souls he seems like a spring of water welling up to life itself.

Faith is the word that describes the direction our feet start moving when we find that we are loved. Faith is stepping out into the risk of the unknown with nothing to guide us but a hand just beyond our grasp and the words "Follow me" resonating in our heart.

Today we have the deep privilege of welcoming two children into the community of Christ, Thaddeus and Samuel. They cannot yet hear the words of Christ saying, "Follow me," but their parents and godparents have heard those words and are trying in their own faltering and beautiful ways to do just that. And they are surrounded by a people, you and me, who are trying to do just the same things more or less successfully. We are trying to move toward the love of God in Christ and to encourage one another to move toward that love. For Thaddeus and Samuel, we are hoping and praying that the love of God that is already present and active in their lives will be something that takes root in them and that they will eventually recognize and respond to themselves. God's grace is operative and alive in us long before we know it, long before we can recognize it and that is the truth and message of baptism. Today we are claiming Thaddeus and Samuel for God, we are welcoming them into this community of faith, and we are beginning their path toward faith that is never easy, never without struggle, never without doubt, but is the source of life and joy once we discover the companionship of Jesus on the way.

Today we are trusting Jesus to create within Thaddeus and Samuel a desire for God. We are predisposing them toward the fierce compassion and mercy of God. We are promising to do all in our power to help them to grow up in the love of God, in the power of the Spirit, in dedication to the way of Christ, in praise of God's creation, and in the wonder of all that God continues to do in this world he created and loves.

If we are honest, we know that our following is not always full of the joy and abandon that marked our first response to those words, "Follow Me." We wish that we were more on fire at times but more often than not we are likely to be dragging our feet, wondering if we really did hear those haunting words, "follow me." However, once you've heard the voice of Christ calling you into discipleship, you can never really ever plug your ears hard enough to block it out for good. You are ruined for this world because you know that you belong to Christ, and that no other rabbi, no other teacher will really do, and that the life you have been called into is not about your own honor or accomplishments but about pointing the way for others into the fierce and wonderful love of God.

By following this one that we can only fully know by following, we begin to discover who we truly are ourselves. And as we follow, all of us together we become something

people call the church or the community of faith or the people of St. Mark's or the body of Christ. Which is to say that we become something more than just ourselves. We become a people on a journey toward wholeness together. To be sure we are not something perfect or all that special, in fact if we are honest we are rather weak and vulnerable and at times a bit scared or half-hearted, sometimes even lacking in faith or confidence in God, but for all of that, something of the fierce love of God that those fishermen experienced while mending their nets comes through. In our very midst the surprising power of God to heal and give hope is discovered in spite of us and through us because in our daring to follow him we become the only body that Christ has in the world, the only hands and feet to do his work. And by God's grace even our bumbling attempts to "follow him" are sometimes enough to help others find their way, to follow in the way that leads to life and healing too. So, this day those same words hang in the air and linger around the font of baptism and the place of grace, they are words not only with Thaddeus and Samuel's name on them, these words are also meant for you, "Follow Me."

*Note: I wish to acknowledge my debt to Frederick Buechner for this excellent writing on this topic of Following Jesus.*