

“Follow Me...”

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 • Psalm 62:5-12 • 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 • Mark 1:14-20

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I have long wondered what was going through the minds of those first few disciples. Simon and Andrew, James and John, two pairs of brothers, all fishermen. The Gospels tell us almost nothing about their lives before this moment. They made their living catching fish in the Sea of Galilee. Simon was married, but his wife never enters the Gospel accounts; we don't know her name, or anything about her life before or after her husband started following Jesus. Nor do we have any idea what compelled those four men to leave their fishing nets behind to start following Jesus. What was going on in their lives? What kind of stresses and strains were they under? What made Jesus's invitation so compelling?

If you've been watching *The Chosen*, you know that that series fleshes out a lot of those details. They take what we know from the biblical accounts, add in what we know about the historical context, and use interpretive license to fill in the rest. Simon turns into a man burdened by debt, looking desperately for any way – moral or not – to get out of it, a bit too eager to try to solve problems with fists rather than words, wanting to make things good for his wife, enjoying the intimate times he has with her, while simultaneously not tending very well to her needs and feelings. He's very likeable, despite his obvious flaws; you can't help rooting for him, and wanting to throttle him at the same time. When he starts following Jesus, he finds himself caught between the demands of his calling and the needs of his wife. For those of you just starting season 3, you're in for some *great* stuff; this tension is building to a climax. *The Chosen* does what the Gospel accounts don't really do: the series turns these disciples of Jesus into *real people* – with hopes and dreams, needs and feelings, worries and fears. It turns them into people like *us*. When Simon drops to his knees at the lakeshore, saying to Jesus, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” – which is a direct quote from Luke's Gospel – we, the viewers, know that Simon is very much speaking the *truth*. He is indeed a sinful man. We have seen his sin in plain view!

So whatever was going on in Simon's *real* life – that the Gospels don't tell us about – *something* about Jesus compelled him to follow him. Something also compelled Jesus to *invite* him. How did Jesus choose his followers? Did he go around asking *anybody and everybody* to become his disciple? It doesn't look like that. Jesus encountered many people, only a handful of whom he specifically *invited* to follow. Mark describes it like this: “He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve to be with him and to be sent out to preach and to have authority to cast out demons.” Notice the verbs. He *called* to him those whom he *wanted*. He *appointed* twelve. There was some particular reason why Jesus wanted *these particular* individuals. Mark names them as follows: “Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder), and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who handed him over.” When you look at this list, what is the first, most obvious thing you notice? *They were all men!* All of them! That doesn't mean that there weren't

women who followed Jesus too – indeed, the Gospel gives the names of several women who accompanied Jesus: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, Salome, and at least one more Mary. Some of those women provided for Jesus out of their own financial resources – which is not said about any of the men. Ultimately, the women come out looking better than the men. The men often misunderstand things and try to one-up each other. One of the men betrays Jesus; one of them lies about knowing Jesus (not just once, not just twice, but *three times*); every single one of those twelve men turns their back on Jesus that fateful night when he was arrested. The next day, when a beaten and bloody Jesus is forced to carry his cross to the place where he will be publicly executed, those men are *nowhere in sight*. But the women are there, watching the bitter ordeal. Two mornings later, it's not the men who go to the tomb to tend to Jesus's body. It's the women. They discover the truth of Jesus's resurrection before the men do. It's the women, not the men, who *first* proclaim the good news, that *he has been raised!*

So Jesus didn't choose those men to follow him because they were in any way *better* than the women. Maybe Jesus chose the men because *they had more to learn* than the women did! Which is, after all, what the word "disciple" means. *Student. Pupil. Learner.* Someone who takes lessons from a master. At the very end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gathers the eleven remaining male disciples and instructs them to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." This is the Great Commission; it's the primary purpose of the church; to invite people far and wide to sit at the feet of our great master teacher. We are all called to be *students*, and to constantly add *more* students into Jesus's classroom. In this school, there is never a time when *we* become the master; we will *always* be sitting at the feet of Jesus, until the day we die. The master in *this* school will *never* change.

The challenge, though, lies in knowing *what to teach*. Some things are obvious, like the two great commandments that Jesus lifts up – "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength," and "love your neighbor as yourself." Those two commandments should always be front and center in the teaching of the church, and should be the primary two things each of us should be striving to do in our daily lives. But other teachings of Jesus are less clear. What did Jesus mean, for example, when he said "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth" (Luke 16:9)? That seems like a very un-Jesus-like thing for him to say! Or, when Jesus praises "everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my name's sake" (Matthew 19:29) – does he want people to abandon their families? Surely not! – *right?* Or what about when he says: "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (Matt. 5:29) – is he actually encouraging people to cause themselves *bodily harm*? A few Christians over the centuries have taken that line very literally and done just that, but the Christian Church has *never* adopted that line as an official teaching of the church that people are expected to follow literally. It might very well be the case that at times Jesus was speaking *metaphorically* or *symbolically*, and did not really intend for people to follow his teachings *literally*.

So you see the difficulty. It's wonderful, *in theory*, to follow the teachings of Jesus. But in actual practice, many of his teachings require *interpretation*. We have to look not just at what he *said*, but what it seems that he *intended*. This means following Jesus requires some *work* on our part. We need to *study* what he said, carefully, thoughtfully, and not recklessly. We don't just get to *pick* which teachings of Jesus we are or are not willing to follow. We need to be more *thoughtful* than that. We can't just let our pre-existing feelings and blind prejudices dictate how we interpret the Bible. We need a *framework* that helps us know what Jesus wants us to do and how he wants us to live. That's what *theology* is for. Trying to take all the many teachings in the scriptures about Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit and put them into one coherent *whole*. There are many different ways of interpreting the Bible. The various

denominations that exist today all came into being because of theological tensions within the church at different points in time. Some people felt passionately one way, some another; both groups found support for their position in scripture; ultimately, the differences proved irreconcilable, so there was a rupture, and a new denomination was formed. This has happened time and time again. It's happened to us numerous times over the years, and it's happening right now in the United Methodist Church.

It's important that people attend a church where they feel pretty much in sync with the theological beliefs of that church. Some people just look for a church where they like the style of worship, or the quality of the preaching. People need to look *deeper* than that. Here in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we ordain and install women to *all* positions of leadership (you won't find that in many of the large evangelical churches!), we trust the findings of modern science, even when they seem to call into question some things the Bible says (you won't find that in many churches that call themselves "Bible-believing"), and we firmly believe that white people are not in any way inherently better than any other people, and that *every person on this planet* was made in the image of God (most churches don't *identify* themselves as "racist," but many churches *act* that way). Since 2011 we have been ordaining openly gay and lesbian elders, deacons, and minister of Word and Sacrament, and since 2014 we have been allowing churches to hold same-sex weddings, and clergy to perform them. One of my colleagues here in Michigan, serving another congregation in this presbytery as its pastor, is a married gay man. That didn't use to be possible in this denomination. Those policy changes were made after a great deal of passionate debate, over a period of many years, and *how we understand the teachings of Jesus* was a key factor in those debates. I'm sure that many of you are totally fine with our new position, some of you are probably thinking, "what took us so long?", and others may be feeling a bit uncomfortable. It's a big change. The American Psychiatric Association stopped considering homosexuality a "disorder" way back in 1973 – more than half a century ago. The World Health Organization stopped considering it a "disease" in 1990. Jesus himself never directly talks about homosexuality in his teachings. There are a handful of verses elsewhere in the New Testament that condemn certain behaviors, but, remember, there are other positions held by New Testament writers that we no longer consider to be normative for the church. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul says that "women should be silent in the churches," that "if there is something they want to learn, let them ask their husbands at home," and that "it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." We don't believe that! In 1 Corinthians 11, he says that "any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled shames her head" and that "if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair." We don't believe that either – or else all of you women would be showing up on Sunday mornings wearing a veil on your head! Just because the New Testament says something doesn't necessarily mean that it *applies today*. Context matters. Interpretation matters. Paul tells slaves to "obey your earthly masters with respect and trembling, in singleness of heart," and Peter tells them to "be subject to your masters with all respect, not only those who are good and gentle but also those who are dishonest." Verses like those have been used like a club to justify a tremendous amount of cruelty, brutality, and oppression in our country. You can't just take a few verses in the New Testament and use them as *weapons*. That's just not right. There's nothing *loving* about that.

We need to follow Jesus. We need to strive to be as faithful as we possibly can be. But we also have to understand that not everyone, and not every church, understands "following Jesus" to mean the same thing! When you go to a new church, you should try to figure out, as best as you can, *what does this church understand "following Jesus" to mean?* And – are you *comfortable* with that interpretation?

So let's keep "pressing on." Let's keep striving to *follow Jesus*, the way that *we* understand him.

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