

“Jesus Said: ‘Follow Me’”

Date: February 22, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Ephesians 4:11-16; Mark 1:14-20 Theme: Discipleship

Occasion: lent 1, series on discipleship

“Follow me!” The invitation is so simple a small child can understand it. “Follow me!” is the invitation with which Jesus called his first disciples. It appears 21 times in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Every time he says it, Jesus is calling for a decisive action. He invites, and expects, a response.

Peter, James and John drop their fishing nets to fish for people. Matthew leaves his tax-collector table and ends up with his name on a Gospel. The rich young ruler hears the invitation, but sadly walks away.

As Jesus’ path leads closer to the cross, the invitation becomes more costly. He lets the disciples know that following him will mean taking up their own cross. Then, at the empty tomb, the women hear that the risen Christ is already out ahead of them, calling them to follow him to a new life.

And now, the invitation comes to you! Wherever you are in your faith journey, this is your invitation to follow Jesus too. We are each invited to take the next step along the path of discipleship

Following Jesus leads to a life that fulfills Jesus’ great commandment that we love God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and that we love others as we have been loved by God.

On this first Sunday of Lent, we are beginning a series called “A Disciple’s Path: Deepening Your Relationship With Christ and the Church,” by James Harnish and Justin Larosa. Each Sunday, I’ll

preach from a portion of their book. That sermon will be followed by a study group discussing the workbook or the companion book that go along with that week's lesson. Both of those resources are available out in the lobby. Copies will be available in the class rooms as well.

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Our author, James Harnish, uses this definition, and I like it: "A disciple is a follower of Jesus whose life is centering on loving God and loving others." So what does that mean?

Well, as Christians, we want to ground our definition in following Jesus. We don't follow a philosophy or some other religious figure. We follow Jesus. But what does it mean to follow Jesus? First of all, it suggests that you are attracted to Jesus and His teaching.

It also suggests you believe who he claimed to be, and who the church says he was. It also means that you are willing to trust him for your personal salvation. There are other definitions we might refer to, such as those contained in the Apostle's Creed, but for now, we'll just focus on "belief in Jesus."

But is *belief* enough to be considered a "follower of Jesus?" The word *follow* implies that something is done with your feet, not just your head. In other words, action is required to be a follower of Jesus. So what kind of action are we talking about?

The Gospel tells us in three different places that the greatest commandment is to love God with all you have, and the second is like it – to love your neighbor as yourself. Therefore, the action that follows belief is loving God and loving others.

In other words, a disciple is one who makes God's love real in the world. Belief and action go hand in hand. Sometimes, our belief is

enough to change our actions. But other times, action happens first and then we figure out what we think about it. But, when we understand what we believe and live out those beliefs by loving God and loving others, then we are really followers of Jesus.

When was the last time you watched a toddler learning to walk? There's always a lot of stumbling, falling down, getting up, falling again, and then taking in a burst of energy and running straight into the sofa.

There's a lot of hand-holding and support, from parents and grand-parents along the way. But as children continue to grow, they get better at walking, and they keep walking for the rest of their lives.

There is a lot of walking in the Bible, and it's more than just getting from one place to another. Throughout Scripture, from God walking with Adam and Eve in the Garden, to the Risen Christ walking among the churches in the book of Revelation, walking is a basic biblical metaphor for living and growing in relationship with God.

As United Methodists, we believe that every follower of Jesus is involved in an ongoing process of transformation made possible by God's grace. This means that we don't just "get saved" and wait to go to Heaven. God's love and grace are continually at work within us,

"Until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." (as we read from the passage from Ephesians this morning, 4:13).

God's grace is a central theme of the Wesleyan tradition. It describes the undeserved, unearned love of God that meets us where we are, but loves us too much to leave us there. God's grace

begins its work in our lives before we respond in commitment to Christ, and God's grace continues to work within us throughout our lives.

Discipleship is all about learning to walk with Jesus. We stumble, we fall, we pick ourselves up and go again. We are surrounded by a community of disciples who pick us up, hold our hands and keep walking with us along the way. But we keep walking.

We keep on growing. We keep moving into a life that is more and more deeply centered in loving God and loving others. John Wesley gave the early Methodists three simple rules to follow, that the Confirmation Class has recently been learning about:

“Do no harm. Do all the good you can. Stay in love with God.” Wesley tried to keep it simple. We keep on growing. Wesley called it, “going on to perfection.” He never wanted us to be neurotics afraid of making mistakes. Wesley simply wanted the people known as Methodists to love God with everything they had, and to love others.

Spiritual growth is the process by which we grow into the likeness Jesus Christ, but only if we keep walking with him. This Lent we will be exploring the practical methods, or disciplines that will help us to grow in our love of God. We are known as Methodists because of the methods we use to stay in love with God, and to do all the good we can.

I invite you to come along on the journey. Come, follow me, as together we follow Jesus. Pick up a study book. Join one of the classes, or simply read the book at home and answer the questions on your own. But as a faith community, let us together answer Jesus' call, to “Follow Me.” Amen? Amen!