

January 7th: Follow

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

Before we take a closer look at our text, let’s pray together.

Jesus our Teacher,

You call us into your divine presence, and you call us to follow in your footsteps. Sometimes we try to make being your disciple so complicated, but you always intended it to be simple—to live as you lived, to love as you loved. We want to make it so difficult, but you make it so easy—we are inspired and energized by you. So this morning we commit our attention to you, we commit our whole

selves to listening and learning to what you have to teach us. Open our hearts to this moment and the ministry in front of us—so that we might be able to transform the world in your name. Amen.

I was in high school when Facebook made its technological debut. At its inception, it was quite exclusive—only open to students with an official college email address. It had this shroud of mystery around it—most people had no idea what this new social networking site was all about or how to gain access. It had a unique allure—it promised connection and new methods of communication—without the drama of Myspace’s Top 8 or the extremely personal nature of LiveJournal—like a real life Yellow Pages where you could look up unfamiliar people and make friends in your extended network.

When Facebook opened to the public in September of 2006, I immediately signed up for a profile. In that first month, I had friends from around the country send me friend requests—all with the accompanying message: “be sure to follow me back!”

And I did! I followed dozens of friends from camp, friends from youth conferences, friends from high school, friends of friends, friends in the next town over, and then friends from college when I began in 2008. We were all “following” each other—watching from a digital distance as we graduated high school, started careers, got married, had children, and other significant milestones.

The act of following eventually moved to additional platforms—there was Twitter, and Instagram, and Pinterest, and Vine—and less common sites like Google+, Periscope, Snapchat, Skype, and WhatsApp. And the act of following expanded—it was no longer just friends or family members whose profile we clicked on—but strangers and internet personalities as well. We followed celebrities, politicians, musicians, athletes, and comedians. We followed our great Aunt Susan, and our college roommate’s boyfriend who later became her ex-boyfriend, and our neighbor’s weird friend we met at a party. Our networks got larger and larger, and our circles got wider and wider.

And like clockwork—we repeat the cycle as new platforms and new technology emerges. Many of you might not be on Tik Tok, but that platform has become the predominant app for Gen Z and Gen Alpha—it’s the primary place where they now go for all forms of news, entertainment, and random cute cat videos. Now we have a new job title for people who use and make money from these platforms: we call them “influencers,” and we applaud their ability to draw in bigger and bigger audiences, to create followings of hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people. It’s become a lucrative industry—with these new influencers building whole careers out of marketing products and experiences to their fan bases.

And I think in the midst of all of that—our idea of being a follower has changed. And perhaps not in a good way.

Now, this is not supposed to be a rant against social media—but rather a thoughtful critique of this act of following that many of us have engaged in. I think this act of following started with great intentions—it started with excitement about being able to see the daily lives of people who we wanted to connect with and being intentional about our relationship—all of that was good. But now that our digital circle is so big, so all encompassing, we might have lost track of how many people or brands or accounts that we follow. We scroll through our homepages, maybe slightly overwhelmed by the sheer amount of data that we have access to or the ads we are subjected to, maybe struggling to find the one or two people that we actually want to talk to. We might have reduced the act of following to simply clicking a button, or “liking” a post or two.

So I don’t think I’m alone in this sense that our once real and tangible act of following has turned into something passive and disconnected. We follow from afar, in an abstract way. It’s turned into something that we do, but mostly with little energy or enthusiasm. It’s something we track with metrics or for marketing purposes, but for the most part, it’s not something that impacts us emotionally or spiritually on a daily basis. When we say we “follow” someone like an influencer, or a celebrity, or even an activist or spiritual leader, we

typically mean it in a way that doesn't really change us or transform our lives. It might provoke some thought, but it probably doesn't inspire action.

So when we turn to today's scripture reading from the Gospel of Mark, we are confronted with a very different vision of what it means to be a follower, we get a very different picture of what it looks like to engage in this act of following.

Last week, Pastor Heather led us as we began this journey into the life of Jesus—and she shared that the story of Jesus begins with someone else—it begins with a man named John the Baptist. And as we hear in Mark chapter 1, John is preparing the way for the promised Messiah—who is the leader who will save God's people and bring about a new Kingdom. Mark tells us right off the bat that Jesus is this Messiah, so that means that every story that he tells, every account that he records is shared with this purpose of divine rescue and restoration. Mark's audience is supposed to understand that every action that Jesus takes is moving the world closer to this moment of salvation.

But Jesus doesn't want to do this work of salvation and transformation alone—he is specifically looking for other people who will work with him to bring about this new reality of hope and peace. After a period of discernment in the desert, we learn that Jesus' next move is to seek out followers who will go on this journey with him. Verses 16 through 18 say, "As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him."

Right away, we hear that Jesus is operating in a similar manner to his cousin John the Baptist. Rather than seeking support from the religious institutions or leadership, Jesus and John are on the outside of the spiritual elite. Instead of calling scribes, or elders, or teachers of the law, Jesus goes out to a rural fishing village and finds these men who are casting nets into the lake. In those days, fishing was not a highly influential position—it was hard manual labor, often left to the men who didn't have the skill to be a carpenter, or a blacksmith, or a baker. But these are the people who Jesus calls, they are his

first choice. And he specifically tells that their unique skill set of fishing will be transformed into this new act: fishing for people.

In verses 19 and 20, Jesus repeats this process with additional fishermen. Mark records, “When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.”

This passage has always struck me as a little funny—because this idea that these fishermen would just up and leave their jobs to follow Jesus seemed a little implausible, at least to me. Mark even says that James and John left their father and his boat “without delay,” as if this invitation is the job offer they’ve been waiting for all their lives. In my own mind, I think, “Didn’t they have wives and kids to feed? Why would they abandon everything they know to follow this random guy who claims to be the Messiah? How could they just drop everything and go?” And moreover, following Jesus doesn’t come with a well planned out itinerary, or health insurance, or even an explanation of who Jesus is and what he is doing! None of them stop to ask, “What direction are we headed? Where’s the map? What’s the plan?”

None of them know what’s going on, they just follow.

I think we could make the mistake of assuming that this is a passive way to be a follower, just like being a follower on social media is pretty passive, but I think that this act of getting up and agreeing to leave everything behind is the very definition of active discipleship. Yes, these new followers might not have any clue just yet what their future holds, and they might be uncertain about what they’ve agreed to, but in these few short verses, they take an enormous leap of faith. They physically walk away from the lives they are familiar with, they depart without delay, they take steps towards a new path with Jesus. This act of following Jesus changes their entire lives. This act of following Jesus transforms them forever. In just a few short years, they will inherit a movement that will radically shift their culture and our world for centuries to come.

So as you might be able to guess, our verb for today, and the verb I'd like all of us to reflect on this week is: to follow.

I think in a lot of Christian contexts, especially post-Enlightenment, following Jesus was reduced to a cognitive exercise—this idea of discipleship was based on agreeing to a certain set of beliefs or thinking a certain way about doctrines or dogmas. In a lot of cases, our denominations and congregations turned following Jesus into “following the rules.” As a reaction against the indulgences system of the Catholic church and the practice of “works based salvation”, discipleship became about believing, rather than doing. We made this act of following more passive, more internal, more disconnected, more sterile.

And today, we see a lot of Christians in our world who claim to be very good at following the rules and are very good at policing what other people believe—but I don't think that this way of following Jesus has resulted in the personal change and societal transformation that God intended. We have communities that are more broken than ever, families that are fractured, and relationships that are estranged. We have economic disparities, and systemic injustices, and dehumanizing policies that have created a culture where it is hard to survive, much less thrive.

So what can we do?

Well, I think the answer is in the question—we have to DO something. Our discipleship and our spiritual formation has to be rooted in action, rather than rooted in a passive or abstract way of following Jesus. Following Jesus is going to require taking a leap of faith, going in a new direction, taking a step away from the comfortable and familiar. And I get it, actually following Jesus can be scary. It can uproot your whole, it can change all your plans. It doesn't come with a set of directions or a firm itinerary to rely on. It takes courage to walk into uncertainty. It takes strength to follow Jesus into the unknown.

But being a person of faith without following in Jesus' footsteps doesn't change us, and it doesn't transform our world. Being a person whose faith is all internal, all cognitive, all theoretical doesn't get us closer to the Kingdom that Jesus is bringing into existence.

You might be asking, what does it look like to follow Jesus? Well, I think it means getting up close and personal, rather than being disconnected and passive. I think it means going to places and people in need, rather than pulling away or ignoring reality. I think it means taking the words of Jesus and putting them into practice in tangible ways on a daily basis. I think it means loving people like Jesus did, as individuals created in the image of God, rather than as a means to an end. I think it means offering healing and comfort like Jesus did, rather than prioritizing ourselves and our desires. I think it means confronting power and power dynamics like Jesus did, rather than being apathetic about the status quo. I think it means serving others like Jesus did, and resting like Jesus did, and working for peace like Jesus did.

Because being like Jesus—that's what drives real and lasting restoration. That's what changes us, that's what transforms us. That's what makes a difference.

So my friends, let's be disciples in action this week. Let's be part of this movement that isn't about believing all the right things, but about creating a more loving, more just, more peaceful world. Let's do something to be more like our Messiah. Like our spiritual ancestors, let's accept the invitation and follow Jesus.

Amen.