

Galatians 5:13-16

Mark 10:32-45

February 21, 2016

Second Sunday of Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

**WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?
SHAKY SERVANTS OF THE LORD**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Followers, Not Admirers

That is the title of a devotion by Søren Kierkegaard that the session read and discussed at our meeting last Tuesday night. Did you know that your elders and I conduct our session meetings as worship services? We do the “business” of the church in the context of worshipping God. We sing, we pray, we read God’s Word, we talk about our faith, we confess our faith.

Tuesday night we read three stories from Mark’s gospel:

* Jesus calling Simon, Andrew, James, and John from their fishing nets to follow him. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are the same brothers who show up in today’s gospel story.

* Jesus calling Levi from his tax booth to follow him.

* Jesus teaching his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Kierkegaard begins his devotion this way:

“It is well known that Christ consistently used the expression ‘follower.’ He never asks for admirers, worshippers, or adherents. No, he calls disciples. It is not adherents of a teaching but followers of a life Christ is looking for. . . What then, is the difference between an admirer and a follower? A follower is or strives to be what he admires. An admirer, however, keeps himself personally detached. He fails to see that what is admired involves a claim upon him, and thus he fails to be or strive to be what he admires.”¹

After we had read Kierkegaard’s devotion, one of the elders said, “Reading this makes my heart beat faster.” I knew exactly what he meant. As I read Kierkegaard’s words, I underlined the following phrases and sentences:

- * keep themselves detached, who keep themselves at a safe distance
- * to sit safe and calm

* Admirers are only too willing to serve Christ as long as proper caution is exercised, lest one personally come into contact with danger.

* They refuse to accept that Christ's life is a demand.

* when all he is doing is playing it safe

* The admirer is infatuated with the false security of greatness; but if there is any inconvenience or trouble, he pulls back.

* The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. He always plays it safe. Though in word he is inexhaustible about how highly he prizes Christ, he renounces nothing, will not reconstruct his life, and will not let his life express what it is he supposedly admires. Not so for the follower. No, no. The follower aspires with all his strength to be what he admires.²

"Who do you say that I am?" is the question that shapes our Lenten reflections during these six weeks leading up to Easter. Last week, we heard the story about Jesus asking his disciples that very question. Peter answered, "You are the Christ." But then Jesus had to put Peter in his place when Peter talked more like an admirer than a follower. "Get behind me," Jesus said to Peter.

On the road, going up to Jerusalem, the disciples were in the right place — "Jesus was walking ahead of them." But the disciples were amazed and afraid — of what? It has been suggested that the disciples were amazed and shocked, afraid and fearful because it was finally starting to sink in a little bit what Jesus meant when he talked about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. They may not have understood everything that was going on, but surely they must not have understood why Jesus continued on his way to Jerusalem. At the risk of psychologizing the gospel story, the disciples who lagged behind Jesus in amazement and fear must have realized that to be a follower of Jesus could cost a lot more than just being an admirer. Maybe that's the same reason Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him when Jesus started talking about suffering and dying.

Originally the gospel lesson for today was to be Mark 10:35-45, but I decided to back it up to verse 32 in order to provide some context for the story about James and John. My study Bible says, "A Third Time Jesus Foretells His Resurrection." Just one chapter earlier, the heading reads "Jesus Again Foretells His Death and Resurrection." After Jesus taught them for a second time about his pending suffering and death, we read, "Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest." (Mark 9:34) Instead of scolding his disciples or sending them packing, Jesus told them what it means to be great: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of

all and servant of all.” Then he engaged in a little show-and-tell by putting a child in their midst and telling them, “Receive a child, receive me.”

Did you notice that this story from Chapter 9 bears a striking resemblance to today’s gospel story? Jesus talks about his coming suffering and death. His disciples jockey for positions of power and glory. Jesus teaches about true greatness coming from service and servanthood and sacrifice. Someone has said that in one verse, Jesus expresses the purpose and meaning of his life and death: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

The choice, then, is whether we are going to stand at a distance and admire Jesus for doing just that — serving, rather than being served, and becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Or, are we willing to be one of his followers, to quote Kierkegaard, “to aspire with all of our strength to be what we admire”? Obviously, we cannot ransom many or redeem any by our service and servanthood. Nevertheless, service and servanthood is the demand and the claim Jesus puts upon those of us who would call ourselves his followers.

Last week I said that how we answer Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” will speak volumes about who **we** are. Jesus doesn’t ask James and John the question point blank, but what **they** ask Jesus says a lot about who they think he is and about who they are — at least at this point in the gospel.

“Do us a favor, Jesus,” ask Zebedee’s boys. “Give us what we want.”

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks in return.

“Give us positions of power and influence in your kingdom when you come in your glory!” said the boys.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” replied Jesus.

At the risk of putting words in their mouths, maybe James and John were quick to say, “Oh, yes, we do know what we’re asking! You’re the Messiah. You’re the man! You’re the one! And we want to be associated with you!”

Mark tells us the other ten disciples began to be angry with James and John. Maybe they tried to show righteous anger and moral indignation, but, then again, maybe they were just irritated they hadn’t thought to ask Jesus first for positions of power.

In his devotion, Kierkegaard says, “The admirer is infatuated with the false security of greatness; but if there is any inconvenience or trouble, he pulls back.” That false security of greatness is enticing. But what can possibly be wrong with asking to be Jesus’ right-and-left hand men and women, 2000 years ago and today? Think about all of the good we could

get done if we had that kind of authority and power! But there's the catch!!! Jesus described the kind of authority and power James and John were seeking in these terms, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them." (Mark 10:42)

James and John were shaky servants of the Lord. So were Peter and Andrew and the rest of the disciples. So are you and I. We may be willing to follow along behind Jesus as he walks ahead of us, but much of the time we are amazed and afraid — amazed at what Jesus does and expects of us and afraid of where Jesus might lead us. The grace note in this story about James and John is that Jesus doesn't reject James and John when they ask their favor of him. Instead, he turns their lives in another direction when he says, "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." (Mark 10:43-44)

As I was writing this sermon on Thursday, I stopped for a while so I could go to the Lenten worship service at the Methodist Church. The first thing I noticed was the responsive call to worship, which were Jesus' words from last week's gospel story, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it." (Mark 8:34)

Then Rev. Dan Sellars got up to speak. He talked about how the church today is good at doing "churchy" things — "churchy" things that all too often are focused inward to serve the church. Then he very bluntly said, "It's a lot easier to live in sin than it is to follow Jesus." Dan talked about how we can say we believe in Jesus and even want to follow Jesus, but when we take a closer look at what Jesus asks us to do and be as his followers, we don't want to go that way and we choose **not** to go that way. In other words, it's a lot easier to be an admirer of Jesus than a follower of Jesus. Yet, Jesus says, "Follow me."

As I e-mailed later in the week with the elder who said that reading Kierkegaard's devotion made his heart beat faster, he wrote, "I think this is an important topic for the church." In our Tuesday night discussion, another elder asked all of us, "Imagine what it would be like if all of us — and our church — committed to being followers of Jesus, not just admirers!" I agree with both of these elders. If Jesus' question — "Who do you say that I am?" is the **crucial** question, then how we answer his question is also **crucial**.

Jesus states his purpose and describes his life and ministry when he says, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” Like Simon and Andrew and James and John and Levi and the rest of the disciples, we have heard Jesus say, “Follow me.” Like Peter and Andrew and James and John and Levi and the rest of the disciples, we don’t always get it right — we are shaky servants of the Lord. And yet, our Lord calls us and uses us and loves us and empowers us to be his servants, even as we serve others in his name.

Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, we believe that you call us to follow you with our whole hearts in all our words and actions. Send us your Holy Spirit to give us the power to serve you and your people faithfully. Send us your Holy Spirit to serve with grateful, generous, and faithful hearts. Amen.

Congregational Response

In the garden, still and deep,
those he asked to watch and pray,
heavy-lidded, fall asleep,
weary from the anxious day.
Shadows lengthen into night.

NOTES

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, “Followers, Not Admirers,” in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), pp. 55-56.

²Ibid.