

Isaiah 9:1-7

Matthew 4:12-25

January 26, 2020

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

STEP BY STEP

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery was an innovative French aviator in the first half of the 20th century. He was also a French hero, remembered especially as the author of the popular book, *The Little Prince*. He disappeared while on an aerial reconnaissance mission over the Mediterranean Sea on July 31, 1944. He is often quoted: “If you want to build a ship, don’t summon people to buy wood, prepare tools, distribute jobs, and organize the work, rather teach people the yearning for the wide, boundless ocean.”

Although he wasn’t talking about being a disciple of Jesus Christ, his provocative statement is a good description of what Jesus did when he said, “Follow me.” Jesus said to Simon Peter and Andrew, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” Jesus saw two other brothers, James and John, and he called them – maybe by saying, “Follow me.” And at the end of this story, Matthew reports that “great crowds followed Jesus.”

As Jesus was seeing people and calling them, “Follow me,” he was also “teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every illness and every sickness among the people.” He was also telling them, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.” Instead of offering his followers a detailed and guaranteed program of what the future would hold for them, Jesus said, “Follow me.” In other words, he was teaching the people to yearn for the wide, boundless, fearful, and life-giving blessing that comes from faith in him.

Saturday a week ago, our elders and I spent several hours praying, worshiping, studying God’s Word, and wrestling with what it means to respond to Jesus when he says to us as individuals and a church (which he still does), “Follow me.” In other words, what does it mean to be disciples of Jesus Christ? Also, what does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ in the 21st century?

The Alternative Sunday School Class recently began a new study called *Discipleship: The Way of Jesus*. In the introduction to the participant’s book, the editor Donald McKim writes, “We receive the gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. We then live out this faith, in the church and in the world, throughout the course of our life. The invitation ‘Follow me’ came from Jesus to his first disciples and comes to all persons today as well.”¹

The main idea for the first lesson was this: “No word is more basic to the Christian vocabulary than ‘discipleship.’ In many ways, however, it is a strange word, because discipleship makes unusual and unique demands on us. If I am a disciple, I must acknowledge the authority of a master or leader. If I am a disciple, I must agree to

submit to the guidance and correction of the community that is organized around this master and to whom I also wish to belong. If I am a disciple, I must commit myself to practicing a way of life that will deepen my distinctive identity as a follower of this master and as a member of this community.”²

At Tuesday night’s session meeting, we read some stories from the Old and New Testaments:

- from Exodus 13, about the Lord going in front of his people in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. We heard that “neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.” (13:21-22)
- from Matthew 4, today’s story about Jesus calling Simon and Andrew and James and John and saying, “Follow me.” And, Matthew tells us, Simon and Andrew left their nets and followed him; James and John left the boat and their father, and followed him. (4:18-22)
- from Matthew 9, where Jesus saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax table. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” And Matthew got up and followed him. (9:9)
- and from Matthew 28:16-20, where Jesus tells his disciples to “Go – go and baptize and teach and make disciples.” And, reminiscent of the pillar of cloud and fire that never left its place in front of the people, Jesus promises, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (28:20)

The Bible is full of stories about God calling people to different tasks.

Most of the jobs were difficult, counter-cultural, rock-the-boat, do-things-in-a-different-way undertakings. Many of the people who are called by God in the scriptures try hard to get out of God’s claim on their lives. Moses says, “I’m not a good speaker.” Jeremiah says, “I’m just a youth.” Jonah hops on a ship headed in the opposite direction. Elijah runs out into the wilderness and hides for his life. Ananias is scared to go to Damascus and take care of Saul. And the list goes on and on. . .

But there’s not a single story in the Bible about God letting his people down when he calls them. God is always out in front of the people, leading them, showing them the way, giving them what they need to do the job he has called them to do. And, then, when the time was right, God sent his own Son to continue the call – “Follow me” – and this is a call that is followed by the faithful promise, “Emmanuel, God-with-us, I am with you until the end of the age.”

When the elders and I were talking Saturday morning about what it means to be faithful disciples and what it will take for us to be Christ’s faithful church in the 21st century, one of the elders said, “It’s going to take unconditional trust in God.” Isn’t that exactly what Jesus is calling for when he says to Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John and Matthew, “Follow me”? I imagine if those first disciples had asked Jesus, “What are we going to do?” instead of giving them a detailed itinerary and strategic plan, he would have said something like, “Come and see. Trust me. Keep your eyes open. Watch what I do.” And, in fact, later on, when Jesus sent his disciples out two by

two, he sent them out to do the very things he himself had been doing – preaching and teaching and healing and proclaiming the kingdom of God.

Now, let's bring the story to bear on our lives and our church in the 21st century. Although circumstances may have changed in the last 2000 years, Jesus' call to us is the same as his call to those fishermen by the lake: "Follow me." And, if we're really honest, most of the time we're a lot like those characters in the Bible who answered God's call, at least initially, with all of the reasons they couldn't possibly go where God was calling them to go or do what God was calling them to do.

Our excuses might be more along the lines of:

- Who me? Are you sure you've got the right person, God?
- Oh, we've never done it that way before, God!
- What would people think if I did that, God?
- God, where are we going to find the time, the people, the money, the energy . . . to do what you're calling us to do?
- You want us to do *what*, God?
- No, God, it's like this. See, we've already figured out what we want to do. Now we're going to ask you to bless the plans we've already made. What? Your call is different? Now wait a minute, God . . .
- What do you mean, Go? If people want to be a part of what we're doing here, they know where to find us. After all, we've been on this corner for over 135 years!

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described faith as "taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." That's a very good description of the beginning of the faith journey of Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John. They left their nets, they left their boat, and they followed Jesus. "O Lord, with Your eyes You have searched me And while smiling have spoken my name Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me By Your side I will seek other seas."

The elders and I have made a covenant to read and discuss a book during 2020 as we seek to be faithful spiritual leaders for our congregation. The book is called *Shift: Three Big Moves for the 21st Century Church*. It's not a how-to book about church growth or new church programs or guaranteed formulas for success. The author wants to help us embrace our identities as disciples of Jesus Christ, be excited to join God on mission in the world, and be covenant partners with each other on this journey of faith.

On page 2 of the book, Mark Tidsworth asks the basic question – "What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?" That was the underlying question for our session retreat discussions and our worship at the session meeting Tuesday night. That's the question we will be exploring this year, and you are invited to join us in seeking the answer.

The author writes, "What does it mean, now, to follow Jesus Christ? When we orient our lives around Jesus, how do our lives take shape? When we explore the Way of Jesus as described in the gospels, what do we find – and then how do we live that? Just what does it mean to live in the robust Way of Jesus Christ?"³

At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus gives his disciples his great commission – "Go, teach, baptize, make disciples, remember." In Bible study this week, someone honestly asked an important question: how are we supposed to do that in our little town, in our little circle? How, indeed?

Here is something to think about:

On our session retreat, we watched a video featuring Diana Butler Bass, who studies changes in the culture and the church, and writes about the challenges and opportunities of being disciples of Jesus Christ in the 21st century. Near the end of the video, she told a story about an Episcopal church near a busy intersection in Chicago. On Ash Wednesday one year, the priest made a last-minute decision to take the ashes out to the street corner. He and the other clergy members, in their full vestments, set up a table near the corner and waited to see what would happen. Immediately, a cab pulled to the curb and the driver got out. "Oh, I almost forgot, it's Ash Wednesday," he said, "can you give me some ashes?"

More and more people stopped to have ashes put on their foreheads. The ministers were amazed. Then a young woman stopped and said, "My mother would be very disappointed in me if I didn't have the ashes put on my head today. But I just can't bring myself to walk into a church." As the priest put the ashes on her forehead, she said, "I just can't believe you actually brought the church out into the community!"

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in the 21st century? What does it mean for the Wallace Presbyterian Church to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ? Maybe it begins with a trusting answer to Jesus' summons, "Follow me," something like: "O God, You are my God And I will ever praise You. I will seek You in the morning, I will learn to walk in Your ways And step by step You'll lead me And I will follow You all of my days."

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, you called many people from many walks of life – to leave their own ways and follow you; to be your disciples. Lord Jesus, help us leave our own ways and follow you together; support each other as we seek to be your disciples; and work together to focus on fishing for people once more. Lord Jesus, we ask for your Spirit's help with this, for the work is hard, but life-giving and essential. Christ have mercy—in your precious name which unites us all. Amen.

NOTES

¹John P. Burgess, *Discipleship: The Way of Jesus* (Louisville, KY: CMP, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 2010), p. 4.

²Mark D. Hinds, *Discipleship: The Way of Jesus [Leader's Guide]* (Louisville, KY: CMP, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 2010), p. 5.

³Mark E. Tidsworth, *Shift: Three Big Moves for the 21st Century Church* (Columbia, SC: Pinnacle Leadership Press, 2015), p. 2.