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Church of the Redeemer UMC

### “Follow Me”

In the gospel of Matthew, we are presented with a different telling of Jesus’ first encounter with Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. Where John’s account has the men following Jesus to the house where he is staying and building on an organic relationship that leads to discipleship, in Matthew we read that Jesus simply comes across the men while they are fishing and says, “Follow me.” And they do. What about John’s story? Does that visit happen before Jesus meets them on the shore? Does that visit happen at all? How can one gospel have Jesus calling the men separately, and in an entirely different city, from this passage where Jesus calls them all together? This is one of those times when mining the Gospels for literal fact can be so overwhelming as to distract from the message. Instead, it has become central to our tradition to *not* harmonize those differences, and instead to look at the context of each narrative and from that to derive truth.<sup>1</sup>

That approach is helpful to us in the structure of this sermon series. We began with an invitation, to experience Jesus’ baptism as if for the first time and then to see an example of how Jesus entered into relationship with others. These are true and fitting examples for us to follow in speaking to others about our faith story, and today we add the call to action: follow Jesus. Jesus tells the fishermen exactly that—“Follow me”—and without question or hesitation they do. That tells us that regardless of the specific details there was something in the encounter, whether knowledge of his reputation or a Spirit-led moment, that gave these men the faith and confidence to give up their livelihoods and join Jesus’ itinerant ministry. This is considered the active beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and it is that ministry that we are called both to join ourselves and to invite others to join.

Where Jesus is calling us to follow today continues to be the source of heated debate. We who call ourselves Christian find ourselves on opposite sides of some very complex issues, many of which just weren’t an issue when Jesus first walked the earth. We have been called since Creation to be stewards of the earth and natural resources, but environmental concerns then weren’t even a shadow of what they are now and so perhaps it’s to be expected that we have different ideas of how to exercise that stewardship. Technology isn’t addressed in Scripture at all, leaving it to us to discern a Christ-centered way of engaging with it based on what is in Scripture and how technology is presented and used.

But then there are so many issues on which Jesus is crystal clear. Next week we will begin a four-week series-within-a-series looking at the Sermon on the Mount, which covers many of them: the laws of the Ten Commandments, but also the exhortation to non-violence and that to love our enemies. We are called to be generous in our giving but not showy; always in prayer but not for public acclaim. And I know it’s true for me,

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor Burton-Edwards, “The Use and Ultimate Rejection of the Diatessaron,” *After Epiphany: The Great Invitation* (UMC: 2016), 39.

but also for many of you, that one of our greatest frustrations in living out this amazing call is that the way to follow Jesus is *so obvious*, how do others come up with any other answer? Of course, I'm not here to answer that question. Instead, we're going to look at how we *are* called to follow Jesus in the end of Christendom.

We are called to follow Jesus into others' stories. Earlier I mentioned the call to action to bring others into discipleship, but I maintain that this is still not a sales pitch. There has to be a conversation at some point in the journey, of course; in Romans 10:14 Paul asks, "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never *heard*? And *how are they going to hear without someone to proclaim him*?"<sup>2</sup> It's true that the way we live should be one of our loudest statements about who Christ is and why others should answer the call to follow, but if nobody actually gives them the call then how can they respond? And how does this relate to going into another person's story?

I've been thinking about this sermon all week, and Friday I got the best kind of surprise that one can get through the US Postal Service: a book I wasn't expecting! The book is *Weird Church: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century*, published in 2016 right here in Cleveland. I'll share more about the significance of the book in later weeks, as I think it will have a big impact on the way we do church moving forward. But I couldn't resist starting it in the lull before I start my Spring semester readings, and I found an amazing passage to share about entering the stories of others:

Donna Claycomb Sokol is a pastor in downtown Washington, D.C. As she meditated with a group of friends on Luke 10 [Jesus' sending of the seventy], she immediately thought of the persons in her church who are unhoused: those who live in shelters or on the sidewalk. These persons have no physical place in which to welcome her. But almost immediately, she realized that they invite her into their stories instead. It is a magnificent metaphor, universally applicable: People's stories are like virtual tiny houses. Imagine yourself entering into this holiest of places, at the behest of another, who dares to trust you. Entering into their story, taking off your shoes, sitting down, breaking bread, sharing tea, and lingering there as long as they give you welcome...Jesus invites us to meet and to dwell with people where they are. To listen deeply for the presence of God in their stories and *to give witness to the sacrament of life unfolding around us with every breath we take*.<sup>3</sup>

The reason that Jesus calls us into people's stories is because God is already moving in their lives before we show up! Evangelism is not about "giving Jesus" to people. We can't do that, because Jesus already gave himself to every being in creation. Evangelism is about *naming* the movement of God that they haven't

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<sup>2</sup> Emphases mine

<sup>3</sup> Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon, *Weird Church: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2016), 20.

recognized, or have and didn't have a name for it. "To give witness to the sacrament of life" is simply to "proclaim" as we are urged to do in Romans.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus also calls us to follow him into any place and time in which people are subject to injustice or oppression. In his sermon "A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart," found in the book *Strength to Love*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. calls us to love others with tender hearts but also to speak out with strong, fierce minds that can withstand the struggle. Just as God tempers judgement with grace and bolsters grace with judgement, so should we actively love the unlovable and act that out in ways that stand up equally for truth and justice.<sup>5</sup>

Yesterday, you may have heard, there was a Jesus movement in the streets of the world. Estimates are still coming in but as they stand, approximately 500,000 women and men of various ages—including a handful of our own members—converged on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. In Cleveland, 15,000 people joined them; in total, nearly 4 million people around the world marched in solidarity to tell the new U.S. administration that we will not be silenced. We will not stand for the continued marginalization of people of color, of immigrants, of the LGBTQ community, of our disabled loved ones, of Muslims or Jews or Hindus or Bah'ai or atheists or humanists, or of course of women and the feminists who love them. Some were there explicitly following Jesus' call; others would say they were there in spite of religion or in opposition to it. But I tell you this: even those who were not claiming to act in Jesus' name were doing just that. And part of my witness is to name that for what it is. That's the Jesus we know, amen?

Jesus calls us to follow in whatever context makes sense for us. Our calls are as individual and varied as we are: maybe you are not called to march, or to go to war zones to witness for Christ. Maybe your call is to craft or assemble goods to send to those war-torn areas. Maybe your call is to volunteer at a shelter or food pantry. Maybe your call is to pray for those in the field and contact your elected officials. (I encourage you all to do that last part.) Maybe your neighborhood is your mission field. "There are so many ways for God's people to follow Jesus into the adventure of serving."<sup>6</sup> Find yours, and do it with all your heart.

Finally, Jesus calls us to love those who scorn our work and our message. The tough mind must always be balanced with a tender heart. Loving those who hurt us or who seek to hurt us or who just don't care whether they hurt us seems challenging when we think of love solely as the warm, fuzzy feelings we have for the people who treat us well. That feeling is like, affection, esteem. Love is a fierce action word, and as I've said from this pulpit before, it requires us to call out inequity. Jesus says in Luke 17:3, "Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive." The loving thing to do is to name the sin so that the offender may turn away from it. But Jesus shows the tough mind here as well: note that he says you must only forgive *if* there is repentance. We cannot know the hearts of others, but we have learned here and in our faith journeys that true repentance bears good fruit that we can see as evidence of the turn.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, Fortress Press Gift Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> Burton-Edwards, 37.

I'll leave you today with another quote from *Weird Church*, one that I think perfectly sums up our call to follow Jesus: "It is precisely when we embrace our common humanity that we are opened to the kind of grace that heals miraculously. We are made whole when we become part of the infinite unfolding of God's love in the world."<sup>7</sup> That is where Jesus calls us to follow, in the Gospels and in the world today. As you go into the new week, look through the Sermon on the Mount and ask yourself: "How will I follow Jesus?"

### Bibliography

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<sup>7</sup> Estock and Nixon, 19.