

“Following in Faith”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 1: 14-20

How do we follow? Or put another way, what causes us to put one foot in the front of the other and go in a certain direction?

As I thought about that this week, I considered certain ways that we follow. If we’re wanting to go someplace we’ve never been before, we follow directions to get to our destination. In the olden days, we used a map and followed the path that was charted on its pages. In modern times, we use our phones and, after plugging in our desired destination, we follow the directions given to us by a voice emanating from our device! If we want to go somewhere new, we often must follow a guide to get us there.

If we’re putting something together, we follow instructions that are enclosed. If it’s a piece of furniture or a toy for our children or something else that we buy, there are often written instructions that come with the item. Some are easy to follow, some are not! If you buy something from IKEA, you have to be able to read hieroglyphics since their instructions are just pictures! Honestly, one of the reasons I love to build Lego sets is because there are detailed instructions to follow, and there is something satisfying about turning each page and making sure I’ve followed each step as outlined. Whether you’re putting together a toy, or a piece of furniture, if you don’t follow the instructions precisely, you probably won’t end up with the final product that is pictured on the box.

But not everything in life is as easy or straightforward as following a set of instructions, is it? If you’re a young adult, you’re trying to figure out what’s next in your life – what you are supposed to do, where you are supposed to go, how you will make those decisions. You’re getting input and opinions from many different sources, and a lot of times it’s hard to know which path to follow. College, trade school, military, or a job out of high school? Internship, volunteering, or a job that pays money during the summer? Grad school or beginning a career after college? Do you follow your passion, and does that intersect with doors that open to fulfill those opportunities? Unfortunately, there aren’t instruction manuals to follow for such decisions – we have to follow in faith.

Such challenges of following are not unique to early in life – they present themselves throughout a lifetime of vocation and service as disciples of Jesus Christ. When we are presented with new opportunities for jobs and careers, how do we follow God’s voice to discern what is right for us and our family at any particular moment? When we are faced with challenging health situations for ourselves or our loved ones, how

do we follow God's grace to know what is the best choice to make for the short and long-term? When we are confronted with a hard, difficult decision, how do we follow God's Spirit to do what is right and true, no matter how unpopular it may be?

It is one thing to follow a set of directions and arrive at our desired destination. It is quite another thing to face the challenges that life brings, and seek to follow in faith, without any guarantee or final picture showing how the end result will be.

Imagine what it was like for Simon and Andrew, James and John. They would stand day after day and cast their nets into the sea. The days would have been long and hard, either filled with much excruciating labor of hauling nets full of fish, or tedious boredom when nothing would happen for hours upon hours. Yet this was their way of life, likely taught to them by their fathers, their uncles, and their grandfathers. They knew no other way of living other than getting into the boat and searching the waters for fish. When bad days seemed to pile on top of one another, it must have felt like there was no way of escaping from this way of life. Yet if they ever did escape, then what would they do? This was all they knew, and to do anything else would have seemed out-of-this-world, to say the least.

Why, then, did Jesus begin his ministry by calling these humble fishermen to be his first disciples? Of all the people in Galilee, why did he walk along the sea and chose these four men to begin a following which one day would include millions and millions of people?

Mark doesn't say in his brief account. But what Jesus said resonates with me. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" (1:17). In the same way they went about their lives as fishermen, Jesus wanted these four men to pursue a way of life not unlike their current one, but with a different goal and purpose. Instead of casting their nets to see what a day's wage would bring, he invited them to cast a different kind of net into the sea of humanity, which he would help them tend and pull in as they would "fish for people."

And how did these four fishermen respond? After years of fishing, all of the sudden they picked everything up and followed Jesus. There was no promise of job security or lodging or food, just "Follow me." There was no indication of what they would have to do, just "Follow me." There was nothing which said this would be an improvement over their current livelihood, just "Follow me." What was it about Jesus' call that caused these four men to leave everything behind and follow him?

All we know from Mark's account is what they did, and that was to drop their nets, get out of the boat, and immediately follow him. Jesus' call was not something they hesitated about, not something which they asked him if they could have a day or two to think about. Jesus' call did not have a detailed outline or set of directions to follow, guaranteeing them what their future held. Jesus' call did not have a job description, syllabus, or

instructions for them to follow. Instead, they left what they were doing and followed him in faith.

And they didn't just follow him – we read, “And immediately they left their nets and followed him.” Elton Brown writes: *We have here another case of instant decisions for Christ: Simon, Andrew, James, and John drop everything and become disciples, just like that, “immediately.” But, again, this is not the end of the story. This is just the beginning of “the beginning” (v. 1). Ahead, for them and for us, there is much to learn, much stumbling, misunderstanding, and backsliding. Becoming a faithful Christian disciple takes both a moment and a lifetime.*

In Mark's Gospel we see how this early decision needs to be reaffirmed and even corrected time and again. At Caesarea Philippi, Simon affirms his faith in Jesus, but not faith in Jesus as the suffering Messiah – that will take a lifetime (8:27-33). On the mount of transfiguration Peter knows how good it is to be with Jesus but forgets that the real task is to follow Jesus – for a lifetime (9:2-8). In the courtyard, warming himself before the fire, Peter threatens to give up a lifetime of fidelity for a moment of fear (14:66-72). At the very end, when Jesus is on the cross, Peter, Andrew, James, and John are nowhere to be found. Even then God does not count that moment as the final word: now Jesus will go before them – for a lifetime (15:40-41; 16:7-8).

Some of our churches so stress the moment of decision for Jesus that we fail to nurture the long-standing commitment. Decision is to be lived out in fidelity, service, even sacrifice. Some of our churches are so good at nurturing that we forget that even “cradle Christians” sometimes need to decide for fidelity, service, even sacrifice. Christianity is always both for now and for the long haul; both a moment and a lifetime . . .

James and John “immediately” left (their father) Zebedee, which probably pained him. But did they dishonor their father? I would like to think not. I would like to think that this parent taught his children to strike out onto the unpredictable seas – and so he could not fault them for going their own way . . .

This passage begins with an ominous note: John was arrested. Mark's audience needed no further elaboration – they knew the story, they knew the risks involved with giving yourself over to a new vision that challenges the status quo. To repent, to begin a new life, to be led by the Spirit, takes not just faith but also courage (Elton Brown, Feasting on the Word, Year B., Vol. 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 286-288).

The other factor to consider when we follow is that we are moving forward. To follow implies that we are not standing still or remaining complacent. To follow suggests we are looking ahead, willing to trust when we cannot see what is in the future, and having faith that the one whom we are following will not lead us astray.

As followers of Jesus Christ, that is what we are affirming when we profess that we trust in Jesus Christ, who alone is our Lord and Savior. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we have faith and trust that when we follow him, he will be our guide and our rock in all times – good and bad, certain and uncertain, uplifting and challenging. The four fishermen by the Sea of Galilee had no previous contact with Jesus, but when he called, they followed with faith, courage, and trust.

When we accept a specific call to serve God – as the individuals today who are being recognized for their commitment to serve as elders and deacons in the years ahead are doing – we are affirming our desire to follow Christ in faith. We don't always know what will lie ahead of us, but we trust that the one we are following will give us what we need for the journey before us.

When we commit to being a follower of Christ, that does not mean we will get it right all the time, or not backslide at certain points along the way. We are human and fallible, and this call to follow is not just at certain moments in time, but it is for a lifetime. It is by the grace of God that we are reconciled for those moments when we stray, and then renewed to turn back to the one who is the source and foundation of our lives.

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Our Lord has invited us to follow him. May we respond with faith, with hope, and with courage, as we trust fully and completely in the one who will never lead us astray.

Thanks be to God. Amen.