

Title: "The Invitation to Follow"

Text: Mark 1:14-20, Philippians 2:1-11

So turn with me if you would to the Gospel of Mark today,  
and to chapter 1, verses 14-20.

We come in on Jesus here as he is just beginning his ministry.

-For 30 years Jesus had been growing to adulthood in the  
village of Nazareth in Galilee.

-He learned his earthly father's trade of carpentry, and has  
been working in Nazareth as a carpenter.

-But now he has left the carpentry shop.

-He has gone out to the Jordan River and has asked John  
the Baptist to baptize him.

-And at his baptism as he came up out of the water the  
heavens were opened,

-the Spirit of God descended on him in the form of a  
dove,

-and the Father's voice spoke forth from heaven: "You  
are my Son, whom I love, and in whom I am well  
pleased."

-And then Jesus was sent out into the wilderness for a 40  
day period of prayer and fasting.

-While he was there he was tempted by the devil in various  
ways, but he did not succumb to the devil's temptations.

But now Jesus comes forth from the wilderness, and he walks  
back to Galilee, but he is no longer a carpenter.

-He is the Anointed One of God, and begins his ministry of  
teaching and healing,

-and he calls to himself disciples.

Here's how the Gospel writer Mark describes it. (1:14-20)

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"Come, follow me," Jesus said.

Three weeks ago when we first began our summer schedule  
of worship at 10am,

-I said that on the Sundays I would be preaching this summer I  
would be looking with you at "Invitations from God."

On that Sunday three weeks ago, we were baptizing Nancy McLaughlin,  
-and we looked at God's invitation to all of us to "Repent and be baptized."

Today I want to look with you at this invitation from God,  
"Come, follow me."

But first I want you to know that the reason we are looking together at invitations from God this summer,  
-is because all this past year we were on a journey of discovering Jesus in two places where we might not expect him to show up:  
-First in the Old Testament.  
-And second in our own lives.

And I don't know whether you noticed it or not, but all over the Bible, and all over your life and mine,  
-whenever God shows up, He comes with an invitation.

God is always inviting people to join Him in doing something.  
-And to tell you the truth, I don't know why!  
-We always seem to be messing things up, and I would think he would just give up on us and do whatever He wants to accomplish all by Himself.

But He doesn't.  
-No, He constantly and continually in every generation comes to His people and invites them to walk with Him.

So it should be no surprise that when Jesus comes on the scene in Galilee, ready to begin his ministry as the Anointed One of God,  
-He doesn't just set off on his own and begin doing signs and wonders everywhere by himself.

No. The first thing he does is he starts inviting people to come with him.  
"Follow me," he says to Peter and Andrew.  
"Follow me," he calls to James and John.  
"Follow me," he will later ask of Matthew, and then later

Thomas, and Phillip, and James, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot,  
-but also Mary Magdala, and Susannah, and Mary and Martha and Lazarus, and the rich young ruler.

This is the primary invitation of Jesus all over the gospels,  
“Come, follow me.”

- And you know what, it is still the primary invitation of Jesus even all these years later to each one of us.
- I dare say that the only reason most of you are even here on a Sunday morning worshipping and listening to this sermon,
  - instead of going to the beach or having another cup of coffee and reading the comics in the newspaper,
  - is because at some point Jesus actually made himself known to you and said, “Come, follow me.”
- And being a part of a church and worshipping with the people of God is a part of your response to that invitation.

In your own way, you said, “Yes, Lord.” And you began walking with him,  
-and one of the places he led you was into his family,  
-into a community of other believers where you could grow.

And if you think about it, “Come, follow me” has always been the primary calling of God throughout the whole Bible.  
-We saw this all this past year as we walked through the Old Testament.

When God came to Abraham and Sarah, he said, “Come, follow me to a land you know not of, and I will make of you a great nation.  
-So Abraham and Sarah got up and packed and left their country and family and followed God to Canaan, the land of promise.

And that invitation would also come to Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph, and Moses, and Joshua, and the Judges, and Samuel, and David, and all of the prophets.

“Come, follow me,” God says to them all.  
“Walk with me, and I will lead you.”

But here's the problem with this invitation:  
-we humans don't really like to follow anybody else.

That's kind of the fly in the ointment, isn't it?  
-We like to go our own way, and we like to be in charge of where we're going and how we're getting there.

Did you ever have to follow someone else in a car?  
-They're driving ahead of you and leading the way, and you're driving behind and are supposed to be following their lead?  
-But they drive faster than you like to drive, or slower!  
-And they go a different route than you would have gone, -and why would they pick that way to get there?  
-There's too many stop lights that way.  
-And why don't they pass that guy ahead of them that is driving so slowly?

You see, it can be very frustrating to be a follower.

Or how about at work, when you come in to the office and have a To Do list already worked out for your day,  
-and then your boss stops by your desk and tells you there is an urgency that needs to be attended to  
-and assigns you to take care of it.  
-What?! But I already have a whole plan of things to be done today.  
-But you're not the boss. You're the employee.  
-The boss is the leader. You're the follower.

-But you see, we don't really like serving someone else's agenda. We have our own agenda.

And have you ever noticed that though there are a whole host of conferences and seminars and books and blogs and podcasts out there on "leadership,"  
-because we highly value leaders in our culture;  
-there are no conferences and seminars out there for "Follower-ship"?  
-Not even one that I know of.

And you hear people say all the time, "You know what this country needs? Leadership."

- Do you know what this business needs? Leadership.”
- Or you know what this church needs? Leadership.”

Did you ever hear anyone say, “You know what this world needs, is more followers?”

- You see, we humans don’t really like or value “following.”

But guess what? In the Kingdom of God, followership is highly prized and valued.

- And the first and primary invitation of God in every generation is, “Come, follow me. Follow ME. FOLLOW me.”

And you know what the Bible calls every one of those men and women who throughout the Bible laid down their own plans and agendas in order to become followers of God?

- Servants of God.

That’s what the Bible calls them.

- Not leaders of God, but servants of God.

-Now don’t get me wrong, everyone of those men and women,

- Abraham and Sarah, Joseph, Moses, Deborah, David, Daniel....

- They all were actually called to follow God into leading people.

- You could say everyone of them became a strong leader.

But what I want you to notice is that the Bible never calls them that.

- Because in the Kingdom of God, that is not what is most important about them.

- What they are called is “servants of God.”

-That is what’s most important about them: that they followed their master well.

- That they let God do the leading in their lives.

- That they allowed God’s agenda to be their agenda.

- That they followed His cues, and submitted to his will, and led God’s people in His ways.

In the Kingdom of God, it is a person’s openness to follow that is highly prized.

- Even Jesus, the very Son of God, lives this out from beginning to end in his life.

As that passage in Philippians put it: He, who was in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant....”

And indeed, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus sums up the who heart of followership, saying,  
“Not my will, Father, but Thy will be done.”

That is the heart of what we now call the “way of the cross.”  
-It is seeking to live our lives in relationship with God, saying on a regular basis, “Not my will, but Thy will be done.”

And that kind of following requires humility, and acceptance.  
-It requires that we pay attention to what God is doing in us and around us.  
-It involves slowing down on a regular basis to be quiet and listen to what God is saying.  
-And then it takes guts to actually follow God, and join him in what He is inviting us to do.  
-Acts of justice, acts of love, acts of forgiveness, acts of healing, acts of self sacrifice and surrender.  
-And following God will ultimately shave away our ego, and build our character, and soften and shape our hearts.

“Come, follow me,” Jesus says to Peter.  
-And Peter’s life would never be the same.  
-He had no idea what responding to that invitation would mean for his life, his family, his fishing business, or his own soul.

But that invitation *from* God initiated a relationship *with* God that would transform Peter’s life and make of him a “servant of God” on a par with Moses, and David, and all the rest of what we consider biblical heroes.

Heroes because they were followers of God, before they were ever led to be leaders of women and men.

So in what way has Jesus been calling you to follow him in this current phase of your life?

I came back from vacation on Tuesday, and was feeling pretty rested and refreshed.

-But Wednesday morning the responsibilities of life and ministry jumped right back on my lap.

Joan Jones had died, and there was a funeral to plan and prepare for.

-I was also scheduled to do a wedding on Friday evening,  
-and VBS is looming, and there was a lot of preparation to catch up on for that.

-I had a million messages and emails to respond to,  
-and this sermon and worship service to prepare for.

But you know, all of those “To Do’s” on my “To Do List” were not what was weighing on me so much.

-It was more the feeling of inadequacy that has always hung over me in terms of this ministry.

You may not know it or believe it, but even after being your pastor for 34 years now,

-I still don’t feel adequate to the task of leadership.

-I am still reading those books on leadership,

-but they often just make me more aware of how much I need to learn.

And reading them often makes me feel that if I don’t get this leadership thing right,

-then this Church is going to die, just like all those other churches in Malden and the surrounding communities that have closed their doors.

So I need to lead well, and teach well, and develop other leaders, and keep the church growing, and make us relevant to a new and younger generation, and learn to use social media better,

-and do a better job of using powerpoint in my sermons so that I have cool pictures of superheroes with cool connections to Jesus.

I need to be able to do it all, because if I don’t, then we will somehow crash and burn.

-Well, that’s how I woke up feeling the other day anyway.

But you know what I sensed Jesus speaking to my heart as I lay there quietly in bed.

“Come, follow me,” he said. “Just follow me.”

“That’s all I asked you to do 34 years ago when you started in ministry at this church and felt inadequate to the task.

-That’s all I am asking you to do today.

-It’s never been about you, Paul. It’s about me.

-All of the wonderful fruit that has been born over these many years at Forestdale is a fruit of your following me.

-It has never been because you had it all together, or were implementing all of the great leadership strategies you read about in books.

-It has always been about your willingness to be a follower.

“So follow me now. Get up and find your joy in me, and serve me today with gladness, and remember, I am with You.

-And I am the vine, and as long as you remain in me, you will bear fruit. So let’s go.”

My friends, when Jesus came into Galilee and called Peter and Andrew, James and John, he said, “Come follow me.”

-None of them were naturally great leaders.

-None of them were emotionally or spiritually healthy.

-Peter was an impulsive mixed bag of contradictions.

-Andrew was quiet and pensive.

-James and John were called “Sons of Thunder” because they were hotheaded, ambitious, and intolerant.

The rest of the disciples Jesus called all had their issues, too.

-Mary Magdala had had 7 demons cast out of her.

-Martha of Bethany was a Type A controlling type.

The only trait Jesus’ disciples shared that really mattered,

-was their willingness to say, “Ok, Lord, I will follow you.”

That’s what I needed to be reminded of the other day, and every day.

-In this season of your life, in what way is Jesus calling you to follow.

-He’s ready to give you a life-long seminar on followership if you are willing to say, “Yes, Lord,” to his invitation.