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 First Presbyterian Church of Athens
 January 22, 2017, Third Sunday of Ordinary Time
 Text: Matthew 4:12-22

Follow Me

Introduction to Scripture

We turn now to Matthew's gospel. He has begun his gospel with Jesus' genealogy and then stories of his birth, baptism, and temptation in the wilderness. What we will hear begins the long section of Jesus' ministry in Galilee.

Matthew starts with the arrest of John the Baptist, that great prophetic figure that links the Old Testament and the New. Matthew then locates Jesus in Capernaum, the only gospel writer to do so. Matthew, who is so keen on connecting Jesus to the Old Testament, next quotes a passage from Isaiah which references the ancient Jewish tribes who dwelled in the area around Capernaum and also "Galilee of the Gentiles."¹ In doing this, Matthew lifts up one of the great themes of his gospel, namely that Jesus came not just for the Jews but also for the Gentiles. He has already mentioned four gentile women in his genealogy, and of course the gentile wise men who worshiped the child Jesus. You'll recall that he ends his gospel with the Great Commission to go make disciples of all nations. The Greek word translated as "nations," is the same word here translated as "Gentiles."

Capernaum is a fishing town on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee. Not far from there you can go to a museum that holds a fishing boat. It dates from the time of Jesus. Somehow it was preserved in the muck and is on display. It's a simple, open, wooden boat. It was among such boats and the fisher folk who sailed them that Jesus begins his ministry with the same call for repentance that John had preached. Then he calls his first disciples.

Listen now again for God's word: *Matthew 4:12-22.*

Sermon

"Follow me on Facebook. Follow me on Twitter." These are invitations you hear in the cyber world. With a click of your mouse or a touch on the screen of your smart phone, you can follow celebrities, news feeds, friends. You can read clever quips, see photos, and get caught up on the latest scoop—even getting tweets from the US President, never leaving your desk or Lazy Boy. When Jesus issues the invitation, "Follow me," I can guarantee that it involves more than passively scrolling down postings and tweets.

Matthew narrates the story of Jesus first issuing the invitation to "Follow Me" to four fishermen. They are two pairs of brothers: Peter and Andrew, and James and John. Matthew's narration gives us few details. There are no physical descriptions of the men, no psychological portraits, no back stories—just that they were brothers, two of them laboring with their father Zebedee. All we know is that they were fishermen going about their work on this inland lake, the Sea of Galilee.

These four fishermen were casting and mending their nets when Jesus comes along and says, “Follow me.” “Immediately,” Matthew says, they left their nets, left their boat, left their father and followed him. We don’t know if they’ve met Jesus before. We don’t know if they asked any questions about what following would entail. Matthew has just boiled their stories down to the essential facts: Jesus calls and they respond. Peter, Andrew, James, and John, then, become symbols of all of Jesus’ disciples, including us. Their stories are our stories boiled down to the essential facts: Jesus calls and we respond. The details may differ. Our call may have been a crystal clear summons that came upon us suddenly. Or it may be a persistent nagging feeling that we try to ignore but cannot. Our response may be as dramatic as a soldier’s about-face, as slow and gradual as the turning of a great ocean liner, or in fits and starts like an erratic motor on an old lawn mower.

But however Jesus calls and in whatever way we respond, it’s clear that Jesus does the calling. Following him isn’t our idea. We are pursued. We are invited. We are found. We are chosen. In the gospel of John Jesus says to his disciples point blank, “You did not choose me but I chose you.”ⁱⁱ This wasn’t the way rabbis of his day usually worked. Usually the students chose the rabbi with whom they wished to study. Not so with Jesus. He does the choosing. He doesn’t seem to choose on the basis of merit. Fishermen weren’t on the upper strata socially or economically or religiously. Nor were tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, or the great crowds that followed him. Even now while his followers may include some of the best and brightest, some of the most spiritually aware, most of us, I dare say, are pretty ordinary in the best of lights. I don’t think any of us would nominate ourselves as deserving his special invitation. He chooses his disciples based on reasons known only to him.

The call Jesus issues is a call to follow him. Follow him where? Follow him how? There are no precise maps issued with the invitation. There are only the broadest of instructions: love your neighbor, treat others how you want to be treated, don’t be anxious. It’s a call to a journey—a journey into the kingdom of heaven, which of course isn’t a geographic place but the reality of God’s rule here and now for those tuned in to see it. It’s a journey of transformation. It’s arduous. It’s demanding. You find yourself in places you’d never dream, places which aren’t found on any diagram of Planet Earth, but rather on the atlas of the soul. The followers are never the same at the journey’s end as at its beginning.

J. R. R. Tolkien’s tale, *The Hobbit*, is a favorite around our house. I first heard it read aloud by my art teacher to her class when I was twelve. My children love the latest film version. I think Anna has the script memorized.

The Hobbit is a journey tale that begins with Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit who lives in a cozy, well-appointed hole in the ground. He is unexpectedly visited by a wizard along with a company of dwarves who sing an alluring, mysterious song about a misty mountain and the treasures it holds. They invite Bilbo to come along on their journey to that lone mountain. He is loath to leave his comfortable life beside his warm hearth and amply stocked pantry. Bilbo cannot conceive of why he was chosen to go on such an adventure, but chosen he was. Almost in spite of himself, he accepts the invitation.

The call to follow Jesus is likewise a call away from comfort and security. Peter, Andrew, James, and John dropped their nets and walked away from their jobs, families, and homes. It was a risky move. They did not consult their bank accounts nor wives. They simply

went on blind faith. They heard the voice of Jesus and walked toward him, not possibly knowing what was in store. It wasn't so much believing in him in any intellectual sense as trusting him in the gut sense. They didn't recite a creed. They didn't assent to a set of doctrines. They simply trusted the one who called them by pointing their feet in his direction. It was a gamble with their very lives. Christian discipleship is just that. It's a willingness to lose everything that gives you security to follow Jesus. It's a challenging journey like Bilbo Baggins's. It's hard. In fact, the closer you follow Jesus, the harder it is. It will call forth gifts you didn't know you had. It will change you. For it is a call to surrender your will to God's. It is a call to obey Christ's commands—difficult commands like love your enemy, forgive your brother, tend the weak, pick up your cross. In so many words, it is a call to die. It is a call to die to the illusion that you are in control. It is a call to die to your own selfish desires. It is a call to die to your need to be right, to be judge. It is a call to abandon the worship of everything that promises you safety—be it money, family, fame, work, health, success. This is the repentance, the reorienting, the redirecting that Jesus, and before him John the Baptist, says we must undergo when we enter the kingdom.

Why ever would we even consider such a journey? Why ever would we leave our hobbit hole? For one reason, we are made for the adventure. The wizard Gandalf reminds Bilbo that while the Baggins's side of his family heritage is peopled with sensible, stable, hearth-hugging hobbits, another side, the Took side, is quite adventurous. We are wired to respond to the Creator who made us. St. Augustine famously prayed, "We are restless, Lord, until we find our rest in Thee." We are imprinted with God's image and yearn to live into that reality. Just like little goslings are imprinted by their mother goose to recognize her—her smell, her honk--and follow her, there is something of the mark of God in us that prompts our desire to follow.

But another reason to risk this journey is because the change it will effect in us is worth it. The pain, the suffering, the inevitable conflict we endure being a follower of Jesus transform us into new creations, as Paul puts it. We grow to be more like the one we follow, more Christlike, more fully human, more the children God had in mind. Jesus said, "If any wish to follow me they must lose their life," but in losing our lives we find them. We discover a life truly worth living.

Like the four fishermen, like Bilbo we don't journey alone. Yes, our journeys are personal, they are unique to us. But they are also communal. We have companions. We are part of the church. Today with our baptism, we demonstrated the communal nature of this journey. Some traditions have godparents for the child. In ours, the whole congregation promises to help this child along on his journey of faith, vowing to encourage him to know and follow Christ. We aren't asked to go it alone, nor could we. I think I might last about a week and a half if I had to be a Christian all by myself. We are called into community, which for many of us began like it did for baby Marshall, even before we can remember. We are called to be part of a band of pilgrims, and all that involves, including getting along with the slow pokes, the yackers, the know-it-alls. We are called to throw our lot with this motley group and offer to it the gifts our Lord has given us, that together we might somehow make up his body on earth.

Lastly, we risk following Jesus because of his intriguing promise to make us fishers of people. Peter, Andrew, James and John were in the fishing business. They fished for fish. Jesus invited them into the people business, I think. "Fish for people." "Make people your chief concern." I'll never forget a line in a sermon I once heard. The preacher said, "Life is all about

relationships. The rest is just footnotes.” Jesus is concerned with relationships--with people--and invites us to be part of his great concern: relationships that see the “other” as a fellow child of God, relationships marked by forgiveness not vengeance, relationships that treat those on the margin with compassion and justice. Following Jesus involves casting the net of grace far and wide. In a parable using that very image, Jesus makes it clear that we aren’t to judge the people the net gathers in.ⁱⁱⁱ That’s not our calling. Ours is to invite others to be part of the kingdom of God, invite others to join the journey with us, the journey of following where Jesus leads.

“Follow me,” he said to Peter, Andrew, James, and John. “Follow me,” he still says to you and to me. “Follow me,” he says to this congregation.

ⁱ Isaiah 9:1-4

ⁱⁱ John 15:16

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 13:47-50