

FOLLOW ME

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Towson Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 9:1-4
Matthew 4:12-23

Today is the day we hold our annual congregational meeting. It's a day for taking stock. There is printed report about our various ministries that I hope you'll take time to read. We will also be looking to the future as you elect new officers and a Mission Review Team to begin the process of getting ready to call a new permanent pastor.

What is the state of our union here at Union Church? On the whole, I'd say it's really good. As the old hymn puts it, "there's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place, and I know that it's the Spirit of the Lord." We'd all like to be richer, thinner and better looking, but in any human endeavor, it's always easy to find fault—very easy to focus on the negative. Part of growing in faith, I think, is learning to "make room in our hearts for one another," as St. Paul put it.¹ One way we do that is by getting rid of the negative, purging our need always to be right, to have things *my* way. That lets you "renew your mind"—to take another phrase from Paul—so that you can, in fact, discern God at work in our midst.²

Someone said, coincidence is the way God remains anonymous. So is it coincidence that the lectionary readings for this day when we are contemplating our future as a church offer up to us these two words of Jesus, so relevant as we close the book on 2019 and look forward to 2020 and beyond: "Follow me."

Jesus uttered these simple words—"follow me"—not once but many times: in today's text, of course, to the fishermen Peter and Andrew by the Sea of Galilee; but also to Levi, the son of Alphaeus at his tax booth. To a balking inquirer Jesus' words were, "Let the dead bury their dead and come, follow me"; to the rich young ruler, "Sell what you have, give to the poor and come, follow me." And to all in his time and in succeeding times, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

These words of invitation and command are plain and disconcertingly personal. They cut through a maze of theology. They do not respect denominational ties or ecclesiastical lines. They do not bow to rank or privilege. "Follow me" are words tall enough and deep enough to guide a church in the most ambiguous of times.

There are several considerations that have moved me in recent months to a new appreciation of these words. First, anyone who says, "Follow me," is going someplace—and we need direction as individuals and as a congregation. I like to think of myself as very independent and self-sufficient. There is a part of me that rebels against following and taking direction. I suspect many of us are that way. Yet when Jesus invites us to

¹ 2 Corinthians 7:2.

² Romans 12:2.

“follow me,” the words contain a promise to connect us with one who is going someplace.

The late Ernest Campbell, a mentor of mine and the former pastor of Riverside Church, used to bemoan what he called the modern “therapy of hibernation” “Leadership that knows where it is going is hard to come by in our society, [he maintained]; and so, we hibernate. We go into a sort of suspended animation, drifting along where the times take us, allowing things as they are to continue just because that’s the way they’ve always been. But hibernation cannot really heal what hurts us deep inside.”³ You may have seen the bumper sticker: “Don’t follow me, I’m lost!” There is more truth than humor in it these days. Whether it’s the impeachment or the economy or the environment or our crumbling inner cities, our political leaders often seem lost. Most of the time, they don’t seem to be going anyplace.

In contrast, Jesus has a plan, a work to do, a purpose to achieve in history and beyond. And he wants to include us. In the original Greek of the New Testament, the word for *follow* comes from the word for road.⁴ To follow is to share the same road. The promise of Christian discipleship is not a longer stay with God, but rather a closer walk with God.

Moreover, anyone who says, “Follow me,” is obviously more interested in the future than the past and our eyes, I believe, need to be fixed on the future. Worrying about what has been, what might have been can consume us. With Jesus it’s not where you’ve been that matters, but where you’re going; not whether you have fallen, but whether you will get up; not whom you’ve hurt in the past, but whom you will help in the future. Fan through the pages of the gospel record and you will be startled to discover how little time Jesus spent allowing people to expand on a burdened past. When the woman caught in adultery was thrust into his presence, he did not try to explore the circumstances that had pushed her to her fall. He simply took her by the hand and said, ‘Go your way and sin no more.’⁵ When Nicodemus came to him under the cover of night, shackled by an impossible legalism, Jesus didn’t ask him how he got that way but said simply, ‘You must be born again.’⁶

The story of the Prodigal Son suggests how God deals with men and women who have failed. The younger brother in the far country never got to recite before his father the speech that he had so carefully learned and memorized. Instead, his words were smothered in his father’s love. He was given a ring for his finger, a robe for his back, and shoes for his feet, and restored to full status as a son. For to be penitent is to be forgiven, and to be forgiven is to rise up and follow.

Yes, we might fall again. We do not move on brashly for our failures are still very much in our minds. But we know that we are being led by light and love. As one New Testament scholar put it, “The living Christ still has two hands, one to point the way, and

³ Ernest T. Campbell, “Follow Me,” *Locked in a Room with Open Doors* (Waco, Texas: Waco Books, 1974), 29-35.

⁴ ἀκολουθέω from ἀκόλουθος, and this from a copulative and κέλευθος. *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*.

⁵ John 8:11.

⁶ John 3:3.

the other held out to help us along. So the Christian ideal lies before us, not as a remote and austere mountain peak, an ethical Everest which we must scale by our own skill and endurance; but as a road on which we may walk with Christ as guide and friend. And we are assured, as we set out on the journey, that he is with us always, “even unto the end of the world.”⁷

Finally, consider the fact that whoever commands us to follow and wins our allegiance has given us a norm by which to test our living. Christ does not absorb us or intend to absorb us. There is a distance between the Lord and the servant, so that our selfhood, integrity, and individuality might be preserved. Moreover, he calls us not to slavish imitation but to follow—each of us in the context of his or her time and place. There is no time or place or circumstance where one cannot follow.

What Christian living is all about, singly or corporately, is following Christ—an important thing for us to see at this particular time in the life of Union Church, when we are being prodded by the living Lord to discern anew our strengths for ministry and to consider new ways of going about it. “Follow me”—this is the word that ought to monitor what we do and say and think as trustees, deacons, mission team members, ministers, and members of the congregation. Is this action, this decision, this policy, this attitude of such a quality that it is moving our church in the direction Jesus is going? Of course, we will sometimes disagree. Some may feel we are moving too fast, taking too many risks, veering too far from traditional ways, while others will object that we are too timid and self-absorbed, playing it safe when a more prophetic witness is needed. We may not always agree on what it means to follow Jesus, but we should always be clear that following Jesus is why we are here.

“Follow me.” To follow Jesus is to have a plan. To follow Jesus is to face and embrace the future. To follow Jesus is to have a star by which to steer. Every time he comes across our way and bids us follow, he creates a crisis. And we can never be the same again. For when that command registers on our souls, we can choose to die to God and live to self, or to die to self and live to God.

The kind of loyalty I should like to command of myself and see this congregation offer up to God can be summed up in the words of an obscure figure in the Old Testament by the name of Ittai who belonged to a foreign country. On a dark day when many of David’s troops were choosing to desert their chief, David turned to Ittai and said, in effect: “You’ve got it made at home. Why don’t you go back? You’ve served us well.” But Ittai answered: “As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be.”⁸

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us, and blesses us with peace, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.

⁷ T. W. Manson, *Ethics and the Gospel* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 67-68.

⁸ 2 Samuel 15:21.