

Follow Me

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Mark 1:14-20

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This is the second sermon in a 4-week sermon series I am calling “Back to Basics.” I have found that the interim time in a church is a good time to review some of the basics of our Christian faith, the beliefs we share, the things that bind us together as believers, the things that make us as a church distinct from other human groups in the world. The person who binds us together is Jesus Christ, and Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” and so over the next three weeks I am preaching on three of Jesus’ commandments: follow me, love one another and go. Today we look at his commandment “Follow me.” Let me begin with a story.

When I was 11 years old, I was a member of a Boy Scout troop that went on monthly weekend campouts together. In June of that year we went on a weekend hike together in the San Bernadino Mountains east of Los Angeles. The hike was billed as a “little tune-up hike” for our week-long backpack in August in the Sierra Nevada mountains. The plan was to leave our base camp around 9am hike up into the mountains, walk a few miles to the ridge, have a trail lunch together around noon, and get back to our base camp well before dinner, a dinner that would be cooked by two adult leaders who would stay behind and keep an eye on our base camp.

On the morning of the hike our Scout leader said, “OK, men” (He had been our leader since Cub Scouts and had been addressing us as “men” since we were 8 years old.) “OK, men, saddle up.” This was the signal to put on our backpacks. When we were all ready to go, he said, “OK, men, listen up: follow me.” And with that he waved his arm forward and we all fell into line behind him, and walked behind him up the mountain.

We all trusted our Scout leader completely. He was a wiz with a map and compass, and always had the hiking route meticulously laid out and had us back within his estimated time. Nothing ever bad happened to us while we were following him. So we just got behind him and followed him up the mountain without a thought.

By around 4 in the afternoon we were still up in the mountains. We hadn’t turned around yet to go back to our base camp. We were off any kind of discernible trail, and waist-deep in thick bushes called Buckbrush. The Buckbrush was so thick that you needed a machete with you to clear a path, but none of us had one so we just had to bull our way through it, and when we did that these little thorns would penetrate your clothes and lodge like needles in our arms and legs over and over again. It was painful and exhausting.

We Scouts began to speculate among ourselves that we might be lost.

Our Scout leader let the conversation go on for awhile and then suddenly gathered us together and said, "OK, men, listen up: we're not lost, we just don't know where we are."

My 11 year old mind was trying to process this. "Lost? Don't know where we are?" Aren't they the same thing? Was he serious? Was he kidding? Was he just trying to lighten our mood because we were really lost?"

The next thing I knew we were definitely lost and still in the buckbrush, but now it was 11pm and completely dark and we had run out of water and food. It was the age before cell phones and GPS. The Boy Scout motto is "Be prepared", but we had only prepared for just a short hike. It was more serious now, but we were still all together, so that made it easier.

Around midnight our youngest Scout, sitting on top of a rock, thought he saw a pinprick of a light down in the valley that he thought might be a campfire at our base camp. We all looked at it with him and thought he might be right. So we ended up hiking cross-country, bulling our way through the Buckbrush toward the pinprick of light until at last at 3 in the morning, completely dehydrated and exhausted, we realized with relief that it actually was our base camp. We took turns putting our mouths under a water spigot and drinking to the cubic capacity of our stomachs. Then we descended on the food pantry like a bunch of locusts, eating everything in sight. I took off my shirt and pants and almost every square inch of my arms and legs was covered with thorns and bruises. Then we went into our tents, got in our sleeping bags, and passed out for what was left of the night.

It made for a good story, getting lost, and we Scouts told that story repeatedly and joked about it, but we agreed that we never wanted to go through that again. And our Scout leader, to his credit, never got us lost again, but I could tell even then that something had shifted within me. I knew now that he could get us lost, and I found myself slightly less trusting of our Scout leader, reading the maps myself before our trips, noting the landmarks, getting a sense of where we were going, just in case we got lost again.

Many of us have had that common human experience, of trusting someone or something, following, getting lost or being hurt or disappointed in some way. It's not pleasant.

John Calvin, the great church reformer and our spiritual forefather as Presbyterians, once wrote that all of us human beings are "inveterate idol makers." An idol is a God-substitute, and Calvin told us basically that we have this knack for creating and following our own gods, one after another, and they all get us lost. We don't want to deal with God with a capital G, so we go after a series of gods with a little g. When one disappoints, we go after another, and then another, in an endless search for a god that satisfies. The problem is that the gods we create for ourselves and follow are so much less than the God we know in Jesus Christ. Our gods are of the earth, imperfect, flawed, limited. Sometimes the god we follow is a person, or a thing, an idea or group of ideas that we in our egos become overly attached to, or the desires of our own heart, or the object of our own fear or anger or greed or lust.

When Jesus Christ said, "Follow me" to his first disciples, and then says it again to us today, it's an opportunity to follow someone in this life who won't get you lost, who won't in the end disappoint.

As a pastor I have met my share of Presbyterians over the years who got lost a bunch of times in life. They tried everything else in the world before they got to the church and met Jesus, and when they found Jesus and began following him it was for them like finally coming home.

The original disciples seemed to know this intuitively, because the story says that when Jesus showed up and said "Follow me", they immediately dropped everything in their lives, left behind the lives they had known, their work, their father, their security, their regular routines, and got on their feet and fell into line behind Jesus and followed him, letting him lead them through the rest of their lives, even though he never said where he was going, or who they'd be with, or exactly what they'd be doing.

What they discovered when they followed Jesus was a radical reorientation of their lives. They learned from Jesus, as if for the first time, how to be a human being in the way that God intended them to be a human being.

I notice in the gospels that Jesus' commandment "follow me" begins and ends the gospel story. It was for Peter the call he heard when he first met Jesus, and the last call he heard before the resurrected Jesus ascended into heaven. It's a call that bookends the four gospels, appearing early in the gospel of Matthew and appearing again at the end of the gospel of John, as if to say that it is a call that never ends, never expires, but a call that comes to us throughout our lives as believers. We are called anew every day to follow Jesus until we draw our last breath.

Following Jesus today is of course a different experience for us than it was for those original disciples. Today we have no flesh and blood Jesus to literally follow. Today, instead, we begin to follow Jesus by coming to church, hearing the gospels read and proclaimed as good news, reading through the four gospels on our own and studying them and paying attention to where Jesus went in his time, who he was with, what he said, what he did. In the beginning we first live out our discipleship vicariously through the original 12 disciples, and then try to figure out how to translate their experience into our own time and circumstances.

When we start following Jesus in this way, we learn again, or for the very first time, how to be the human being God intended us to be.

It occurs to me that we've got people in our lives to teach us all manner of practical things. When we're young, we've got people to teach us how to tie our shoes, how to read, how to write, how to do math. Later someone, like a Scout leader, may teach us how to live out in the woods, how to use a map and compass. Someone else may teach us how to earn a living, how to survive in the world.

But who is there in our lives to teach us in a comprehensive way how to be a human being? Who will teach us compassion, goodness, mercy, forgiveness, grace, speaking the truth in love? Who will teach us how to experience this human life in all of its fullness and abundance? Who will teach us that's it's never too late to seek a newer world? Who will show us our human potential for loving and healing? Who will teach us to put to death the lesser things we think we want, so that we can open ourselves to God's larger purpose for our lives. Who will keep correcting our false notions of God and of one another and church and life? Who will keep challenging our inveterate idol-making?

This is what Jesus did for his original disciples, and more, and this is what he does for us when we follow him.

As your interim pastor, I want to put the person of Jesus Christ front and center while I am here with you, that is, the Jesus described in the four gospels, and emphasize our need to give up what we think is life, just as those original disciples did, and follow Jesus to wherever and to whomever he leads us, individually and as a whole church, knowing that wherever we end up with Jesus, it's going to be life indeed, Life with a capital L, because life and more life is what Jesus is all about. "I came that you might have life," Jesus said, "and have it abundantly."

I am putting Jesus front and center because I don't want you to get lost, and churches can get lost, and it happens when together we stop following the person of Jesus Christ as revealed in the gospels and we start substituting our own idols for Christ.

The late poet William Stafford a month before his death wrote a beautiful and provocative short contemporary poem that speaks to me about the Jesus who says to us "Follow me." Listen to "The Way It Is", a poem by William Stafford:

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

By William Stafford, from The Way It Is, 1998

Like all good poets, Stafford courteously gives us room, space, to figure out what his poetic images mean in our lives. He is convinced that there is something consistent in each of our lives that acts as a guide in our lives. We may or may not be conscious of this consistent thread

in our lives, but he insists that we all have one. And yet he leaves it up to us to determine what the “thread” is for us. What is that thread you and I follow in this life and never let go of no matter what happens in life? What is that consistent thing that we hold on to throughout this life and that ultimately guides us through this life?

My hope as the last of your interim pastors is that your “thread” will be the person of Jesus Christ. Let him be the thread in life that you follow, the one who doesn’t change, the one who doesn’t get you lost, and the one you never let go of no matter what happens.