



**“Whom Will You Follow?”**  
**Scripture – Matthew 4:12-22**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, January 22, 2017**

To set the context for this morning’s passage, Jesus has yet to begin his ministry. He is around 30 years old, he has been baptized by John the Baptist, and he has spent 40 harrowing days in the wilderness wrestling with temptation and discerning his mission. He has not yet told a parable, delivered a sermon, or healed a single person.

Perhaps in your mind you can picture him walking along the rocky bank of the Sea of Galilee, which is actually a large fresh water lake. Looking across the blue-green water, he spots a boat with two fishermen not far offshore and watches as they attempt to land a catch. The men gather their net, and then let it fly out over the water. Using the technique their father had taught them, the net fans out like a large flat plate with an umbilical cord attached. It appears to hover for a second, and then gracefully touches down on the surface of the water. The tiny weights around its outer rim pull the net toward the bottom. The men allow the net to sink and then haul it back in hoping to capture a few fish in its web.

Jesus calls out to the two: “Follow me and I will show you how to catch people.” Our passage states: “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

Jesus continued walking along the edge of the lake until he spotted two younger men sitting in a boat with their father mending their nets. Jesus invited them to come along with him, and the two young men climbed out of their boat, walked away from their father and joined up with Jesus. Why were these four so quick to decide?

Had they met Jesus previously? Had they heard about him? Or, were they simply tired of the backbreaking work and the smell of fish?

We might expect the gospel to inform us that Jesus had some sort of holy aura about him that was irresistible; but the text falls silent. No reason is given for them dropping everything and tagging along with him. However, what seems obvious is that when these first disciples joined Jesus, they had no clue what would be demanded of them.

I suspect the same could be said of most of us. When we began to follow Jesus we did not fully understand the repercussions of our decision.

Before he became a Bishop in the United Methodist Church, William Willimon served as the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. With frank words typical of Willimon, he once said, “I work at a university where we are in the business of helping people grow up and be great – self-made, self-sufficient, empowered, competent...When

you graduate from Duke, if you do what we faculty tell you, you will be smart, professional, on your own – like us – and you will not need anybody else.”

This drive toward independence and self-determination is not only present in contemporary colleges and universities; it is the culture in which we swim. Many voices call out to us to pursue “this ideal of a self-sufficiency that ultimately imagines no real need for anyone... (However) such radical independence and total self-reliance is a lie.”<sup>1</sup> All of us need others to grow and thrive and to survive the rough stretches of life.

Not only do we need the encouragement, inspiration, and support of others, we need some philosophy or goal or person to give us direction.

Some follow the advice of a business guru, some fawn over celebrities or sports heroes, some have their ideas shaped by political leaders or pundits. I suspect most of us follow the advice of several voices rattling around in our minds.

Of course, it is not only *people* who shape us and give us direction, but also internal longings for happiness, for meaning, for acceptance, for wholeness.

A well-known author wrote: “Why do we torture ourselves with things we don’t have and aren’t likely to get? Why do we eagerly seek out images of lives we are unlikely to lead? It’s precisely because fantasy, imagination, and dreaming play a far more significant role in our makeup than we are accustomed to acknowledging. We are influenced, far more than most of us admit, by some longing for completion, some impulse toward heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

More than 15 centuries earlier, Augustine observed that “Our hearts are restless, until they find rest in God.” Deep within the human soul, there is a longing to be in harmony with God.

People have become followers of Jesus for all sorts of reasons. Many because that’s how they were raised. It was the milieu within which they grew up so it seemed like the natural thing to do. Others were not raised in the church, but decided to latch on to Jesus because their life was a wreck and they needed it repaired.

Can you remember why you became a follower of Jesus?

I’m not sure anyone ever sat down and read the entire New Testament, made a list of pros and cons, and then decided to become a Christian. We don’t follow Jesus after we have figured out all it will entail. We commit ourselves to a journey, and while traversing the magnificent mountains and the dark valleys of our lives, we deepen our understanding of the one who is Lord of our life. Time and again throughout our lives we must decide whether we will continue to follow him.

Our loyalty to Jesus is constantly being tested, and this year may prove to be especially challenging. The events of the past two days have reminded us of the stark disagreements and the deep divisions in our nation. It has reminded us that honest people can disagree and see things from very different perspectives. However, it also reminds us that such an atmosphere can provide an opening for spiteful individuals to condone ill will under the guise of virtue.

I doubt our country has been this deeply divided since the sixties. As people try to decide which politician, which activist, which political party will lead them, it is vitally important that people of faith not betray our Lord. If we claim to be a follower of Jesus, it is at times like this that the stakes are raised.

It is at times when our passions are raging that we must ask ourselves how we can move closer to, rather than further away from the values Jesus espoused.

Following Jesus injects our lives with vitality. In him, we can find strength to endure life's storms, guidance in times of confusion, peace in times of anxiety, forgiveness when we have made a mess of things, a purpose for living, a community of caring people (yes, you!), joy in times of sadness and hope when there seems to be no apparent reason to hope.

I am convinced that following Jesus is the best path to take. However, this comes with a word of caution. Like those stickers that say the surgeon general warns this could be hazardous to your health, you need to be aware that being faithful to Jesus can also be unsettling. He demands a course correction when we are on the wrong path. He commanded us to love one another. In the parable of the Good Samaritan he taught that anyone in need is our neighbor. In his first sermon he said his mission was to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives and to liberate the oppressed. He had compassion for those whom society had neglected – the lepers, the prostitutes, and the demon possessed (think mental illness and addiction). He had ugly things to say about people who trusted in their wealth, and in his vision of heaven and hell (Mathew 25:31-46), he said that those who are faithful to him are the ones who feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, comfort the ill and visit those in prison. In the Sermon on the Mount he called on us not to hate our enemies, but to love them and pray for them.

Doesn't that just drive you crazy? It does me! It can be so satisfying to direct all of my fury at the person who represents what I believe is wrong and hurtful about our world. It is much harder to pray for God to transform someone's heart and mind – including my own.

It appears that our nation is in for a rough ride in the days ahead. Tempers will flare, people will be threatened. Thanks goodness we live in a nation whose hallmark principles are based on the teachings of Jesus – liberty and justice for all.

Still, our loyalties will be tested. Are you first and foremost a Democrat or Republican, or is your first allegiance to Jesus? Do you see other people as either red or blue – or each one a child of God?

We have the freedom to make choices that have real and lasting consequences. Whom will you follow?

NOTES:

1. Michael Lindvall, "Independent and Self-Reliant?" January 11, 2015.
2. David Brooks, *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (and Always Have) in the Future Tense*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 199.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Greg Jones**

Eternal God, this day we are mindful that it is easier to adopt the ways of the world than to follow the path of Jesus. We claim we are committed – we sing hymns of praise, we utter prayers of thanksgiving, we study the scriptures and we pledge our devotion. But when Jesus calls on us to pick up our cross and to follow him into an unknown future, we waffle. Indecision reigns in our minds and our feet freeze at the threshold.

We want to be faithful, but we are not sure we want to step into new territory. We have grown accustomed to our comfortable routines and we become anxious when Jesus issues a formidable challenge. We balk at his call to lose ourselves in you and to give ourselves for others. Loving God, forgive us: for our feeble faith, for our conditional compassion, and for our measured mercy.

Mighty God, we yearn for the wisdom to discern your guidance and the will to follow you. Grant us uncluttered minds to meditate on your word; clarity of vision to behold signs of your kingdom; open ears to hear your whispers deep within our souls; and receptive hearts to the call of Jesus to faithfully follow him into the places of need.

God of Peace, there are so many places that scream out in pain. Our world is ablaze with wars and terrorism is on the rise. Violent crime and drug wars are too prevalent in our cities. The ugly sin of racism refuses to die. Intolerance of other faiths makes many skeptical of any religion. People with mental illness are turned out onto the street. Hunger and poverty rob children of a decent life. Pollution of our planet puts future generations in jeopardy. The problems are so vast that it is easy to become overwhelmed and discouraged to even step into the fray.

God of Justice, do not let us surrender to hopelessness. Remind us that faithful and determined people working for a just cause can overcome tremendous odds. Grant us courage to tame our fears and to defeat despair. Fill us with your Spirit so that we may love without reservation, spread light in dark places and give ourselves generously in your name. Amen.