



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost**

**October 2, 2016**

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**“More than Just Tagging Along”**

*(John 1:43)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me’” (John 1:43).*

**COLLECT:** O God, our refuge and strength, the author of all godliness, by your grace hear the prayers of your church. Grant that those things which we ask in faith we may receive through Your bountiful mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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He said, “Follow me.” And that’s what Philip did. He got up and followed Jesus. We wish there were more to it than that. We wish we knew more about Philip and what made it so easy for him to drop everything. What made him so willing to accept the risks and uncertainties and insecurities and changes? Was it because he had nothing else to lose? Was he so down on his luck that he was totally free to pull up the stakes? Did he have good reason for his confidence in Jesus? Did he know where he was leading them? We wish we knew more, but this account of Jesus calling Philip is so lean. He says “Follow me” and that’s what Philip does, and that’s what many of the disciples did. They dropped everything and followed.

And yet they were not zombies. They were every bit as human as you and me, with all their faults and frailties and petty ambitions. The Lord is not manipulating them like puppets. They are real people who could have said no, but chose to say yes.

Many do choose to say no. Many are simply too busy to follow him. It’s not that they deliberately turn their backs on Jesus. It’s just that they’re so busy and distracted that they never get around to following him.

Others decide the cost of discipleship is too great. You recall the rich young man who came to Jesus and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. He was a good man. Jesus loved him. But Jesus also asked him to give up his idolatry. “Go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor. Then come and follow me.” The young man went away sorry, because he couldn’t conceive of doing something so radically new. He wanted to follow, but not if it meant changing anything or giving anything up.

A couple of weekends ago we were worshipping at Holy Cross Lutheran in St. Louis, Stephanie's church. They have an old stained glass window that shows Jesus at the door knocking. One foot is on the front step, his right ear and shoulder are leaning against the door. It looks like he wants to break in, but of course he won't. He doesn't do that. He doesn't force himself into our lives or force us to follow him. In Revelation 3, he says, "I stand at the door and knock; if any man hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in." Someone said you might want to think twice before letting him in, because once he's in he's going to want rearrange the furniture and tell you to change things about you that maybe you don't want to change and give things up that maybe you don't want to give up.

Horace Hummel, one of my professors at the seminary would also go on archaeological digs in the remote desert areas east of the Dead Sea. He had an expression, "Let the camel's nose in the tent, and pretty soon the whole beast will be inside." It came from experience. It's the same way with Jesus. He wants all in, not just his nose, and he wants us to be all in as well.

In Luke 9, Jesus said to another man, "Follow me." And the man replied, "Ok, but first let me go and bury my father." Reasonable enough, we think . . . but not to Jesus. "Let the dead bury their own dead" he said, "you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." (Yikes!) Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family." Again, nothing absurd about the request. But Jesus replies, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." He wants us to take his call to follow him very, very seriously. No half-hearted measures. No pretending to be followers.

Notice, following Jesus is not the same as believing in him. Most of us have been asked at some point if we believe in Jesus. What people are looking for is an affirmative response to a list of doctrines. But how often have you ever been asked if you are following Jesus? It's

more difficult to follow him than it is to believe in him. My guess is there are lots of people who can say yes to a long list of doctrines without ever really changing anything about themselves. But following him involves change. It involves movement. When you follow him you're going places and interacting with people, serving them, loving them as a disciple, witnessing to them.

And following Jesus is not the same as imitating him. He calls us to use our gifts and skills, our experiences and training, our backgrounds and talents. He calls us to be who he has made us to be. Learn from others, for sure, but don't try to imitate others. Imitation is a form of suicide.

Rabbi Ray Zussye imagined himself standing before God trying to justify how he lived out his life. He writes, "If God will ask me: Zussye, why were you not like Moses? I shall respond, because you did not grant me the powers you granted Moses. If God will ask me: Zussye, why were you not like Rabbi Akiba? I shall respond, because you did not grant me the powers you granted Rabbi Akiba. But the Almighty will not ask me why I was not like Moses or why I was not like Rabbi Akiba. The Almighty will ask me: Zussye, why were you not like Zussye? Why did you not fulfill the potential which was Zussye? And it is for this question that I tremble."

Following Jesus is not the same as imitating him or anyone else. God has created you and given you unique gifts and skills and interests and experience. He's calling *you* to follow him.

The Greek verb for follow (*akaloutheo*) is found eighty-seven times in the four Gospels. Following Jesus is a dominant theme. But following him can be costly. Following Jesus puts on you a set of values and laws that are by no means easy to keep, nor convenient nor even welcome anymore in our culture.

And remember his life ended on a cross, so sacrifice is an implicit part of following Jesus. Following him will take us places we would prefer to avoid, to befriend and serve people we would rather not. It often means letting go

of things or ideas that we would like to hold on to. And it requires courage. Following Jesus today means not walking away from, the problems and pains of our society: the hungry, the addicted, the hopeless, the children who are abused, the aged who are neglected, the high school drop outs, the prisons that are chock full. Anyone who takes seriously Jesus' call to "Follow me" will not be able to ignore these contemporary versions of the least and lost, the sinners and outcasts, whom Jesus came to seek and to save.

If you want to follow Jesus, focus less on the question of "What do I believe?" and more on the question of "What are my responsibilities as a Christian for these my neighbors?"

Earnest Campbell posed some challenging questions for himself and for us:

- If I'm following Jesus, why am I such a good insurance risk?
- If I'm following Jesus, why when I have done my giving have I so much left over for myself?
- If I'm following Jesus, why do my closets bulge when so many are unclothed?
- If I'm following Jesus, why do I have so many friends among the affluent and so few among the poor?
- If I'm following Jesus, why do I have so much privacy in a world that is starved for love?
- If I'm following Jesus, why am I tempted to overeat in a world where so many beg for bread?
- If I'm following Jesus, why do missiles and guns make me feel more secure?
- If I'm following Jesus, why am I getting on so well in a world that marked him out for death?

(Bryan Sirchio, lyrics from "Follow Me [87 times]).

Following Jesus also means forgiving others, rather than holding a grudge, apologizing rather than forever trying to save face, serving rather than being served, giving away rather than hoarding resources and skills and love and life.

The promise is adventure, surprise, challenge, and through it all – life, rich, meaningful, rewarding life.

And the promise is he's going with us. We are not alone on the journey. Jesus said, "Follow *me*" which means he's with us every step of the way. He's not asking us to carry anything he hasn't already carried, or to go anywhere where he hasn't already been. He walks in front of us and beside us. When we're lost and confused, he is there to guide. When doubt and fear overtake us, he is there to calm us. When swept up in grief or despair, he gives us hope. "They will call him Immanuel" Isaiah prophesied, which means God with us . . . every step of the way. You'll never have to face the perils alone, because you're following him.

Earlier we asked why Philip seemed so ready and willing to follow Jesus. Maybe a better question is what made Jesus so ready and willing to come down to earth in the first place? What made *him* so willing to accept the risks and uncertainties and dangers? What made him so willing to change his life so dramatically? Was it because he had nothing else to lose? Seems to me he had everything to lose. Was he so down on his luck that he was totally free to pull up the stakes? Of course not! Did he have good reason for his confidence in us? None whatsoever. So if not any of those, what made him so willing to come down to this messy earth to teach and preach and serve and die and save? What else but love? What else but love?

And he was all in, because that's what love does. He held nothing back, because his kind of love isn't cautious or prudent in that way. He took no half hearted measures, his commitment to the mission wasn't lukewarm, and he never pretended. He never just tagged along. No, he was all in for us and our salvation, even unto death on a cross. What else but love drove him to do that?

And now he's looking right at you, with two words to say: "Follow me." Amen.



