

“Follow Jesus to New Identity”

Salado UMC—28 January 2018
3rd Sunday after the Epiphany
Preaching Text: Mark 1:14-20—Year B
Salado, Texas 76571

“The end of life is to be like God, and the soul following God will be like him”

(Socrates: 469—399 BCE).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him (Mark 1:14-20—Year B).

A man was arguing with an airport ticket agent and insisted that the airline give him a seat on an already full flight. The man brushed aside the agent’s explanations and became more abusive. The agent’s patience was justifiably wearing thin. A crowd gathered to listen to the exchange. Finally, the man asked: “Do you know who I am?”

I appreciate what she did! She picked up the microphone and announced: “Ladies and gentlemen, I have someone here who does not know who he is. Can anyone help him?” Worship today centers on following Jesus to a new identity.

In the early church people who had personally experienced Jesus’ life and death began to pass away. Naturally the church needed a more permanent account of Jesus’ life and teachings. Thus, several persons wrote about these events. Tradition suggests Mark, while in Rome, wrote what Peter’s memory dictated. Mark’s Gospel stressed the crucifixion and resurrection as keys to understanding Jesus.

In today’s story, after the wilderness temptation, Jesus returns to Galilee. Jesus preaches that “the time is fulfilled.” That is: God’s appointed and crucial time for God’s action has arrived. Jesus also proclaims that “the kingdom of God has come near,” suggesting the final era of history is in sight. Mark’s entire Gospel expands on the verse that reads: “repent and believe in the good news.”

In verses 16-20, Jesus calls the first four disciples. Incredibly, they immediately leave their previous vocations and follow Jesus. Jesus expresses his command in their vocational terms, i.e. “I will make you fish . . .” (v. 17). Jesus’ call was persuasive. These first disciples required little or no deliberation to make a

wholehearted commitment. The word immediately (used 27 times in Mark's Gospel—NRSV) characterizes Mark's Gospel. The extensive use of the word "immediately" simply means that the time is at hand! When Jesus calls these "soon to be disciples" they gave up security and family ("left their father", v. 20) to devote themselves to Christ's mission.

A good church theme for any year is "Follow the Leader." Of course, the leader is Jesus, but what does it mean to follow a leader—and especially one like Jesus—a leader like no other? Our text is about following Jesus to a new identity, but if we are not careful we can easily focus on the term "identity" instead of "follow." Certainly, each is important, but truly I say unto you: the journey may be the thing—but in order to follow one must be ready to move.

Covert Bailey is a long-time nutritionist. He is also an expert on how people can get fit, lose weight, and keep the weight off. Bailey wrote something that made a lot of sense to me. If you want to get fit then follow around a ten-year-old boy. Do what he does. If and because these youngsters play outside rather than watch television or play video games, then they are always moving. Thus, they are in excellent physical condition because they move and keep moving all day long.

Getting in shape was the #1 New Year's resolution for people we know. How many have already abandoned this plan four weeks into a new year? We want to get fit, lose weight, and keep it off. But the problem is that nightly we sit on a couch and by day at a desk. Somehow, we presume that by never changing we will suddenly get fit. Covert Bailey says the only way to get fit is to get moving—and to keep moving.

Spiritually this same notion is true. If we want to change our relationship with God and/or another person, then we must move either physically or metaphorically. When Jesus says to us, "Follow me," Jesus invites us to get moving. If we move then we have the possibility of becoming more spiritually fit. If we can follow Jesus' invitation, then we can become not only spiritually fit, but also become a leader—which in a way is what discipleship is all about. To follow Jesus, we must move!

The key to good leadership resides in a leader's ability to leverage her/his influence with followers—just like Jesus did when he said "follow me." We each have a degree of influence with other people—sometimes in the family, the classroom, or the neighborhood. Yet, not everyone knows how to employ influence. Consequently, the better we understand our God-given influence, then the better we can use it for good.

To be a leader, disciple, or follower of Jesus is to use the power of influence to further the aims revealed in God's realm. This realm signifies for Jesus God's intention for creation. So, the better we understand our leadership influence, the better we understand the why and how of our leadership gift. Disciples are, in fact, stewards of the leadership talents that God has entrusted to us. When God endows a disciple as a leader with spiritual influence, then God expects such persons to use them to build up the realm of God. And it can be simple.

A foreign correspondent once interviewed Mother Teresa in Calcutta. Never distracted from duty, she granted an interview but only as she went about her tasks—that day binding up several leper's wounds with clean bandages. As the correspondent watched he muttered, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars."

Mother Teresa quietly replied, "Neither would I."

With those three words she planted the seeds of Jesus' word: "follow me." Her influence was quiet, simple, but clear. Her discipleship made her a leader because with only three words she influenced someone for the rest of his life.

David N. Mosser, Salado UMC, Salado Texas 76571