Following…at a Distance

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
John 1:35-51

March 8, 2015
Keeping your distance is advisable when it comes to things like cars, gossipers and skunks. I was taught the three-second rule in Driver’s Education. You need three seconds of separation from the car in front of you to maintain a safe driving distance. Given the way people drive in DC, I’m not sure anyone adheres to this rule anymore.

Keeping your distance is advisable around people who like to gossip. Don’t share privileged information with those who can’t keep secrets.

Keeping your distance is a really good idea around skunks. If you get too close to skunks, they will treat you as a predator and spray you. I learned this lesson the hard way when I was young.

But keeping our distance can also undermine marriage and family relationships. Too much distance in a marriage or family can sabotage interpersonal relationships. Keeping distance from God can have equally dire consequences. We’ll come back to this thought later in this sermon.

We’re now 23 chapters into this abridged, chronological version of the Bible called The Story. We’ve surveyed the Old Testament and come, at long last, to the New Testament story of Jesus. The story of Jesus is told in four eyewitness accounts called gospels. Gospel is a word meaning good story. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell us the good story about Jesus.

In the first chapter of John, Jesus inaugurates his ministry by calling five people to follow him. Their names are Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathaniel (also identified by the surname Bartholomew, meaning son of Tolmai) and an unnamed disciple, most likely our author John. These five, along with seven others, form the nucleus of Jesus’ band of followers called disciples or the 12 apostles.

When, in our story, Andrew and his friend overhear John the Baptist herald Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (1:29, 35), they drop what they’re doing to follow Jesus. Jesus turns and asks them, “What do you want?” They want to know where Jesus is staying. They are awkward about asking for time with Jesus. “Come and see,” Jesus tells them. They spend the next 14 hours with Jesus. No doubt Jesus offers them a crash course in what it means to become his followers.
The next day, Andrew tells his brother Simon, “We have found the Messiah” (1:41). Jesus takes one look at Simon and issues him a new name, “You are Simon. You will be called Cephas,” which is an Aramaic name for Peter. Both names mean rock. Peter’s name will be a portent of what he will one day become.

Jesus leaves the following day for Galilee to find Philip. John’s language suggests that Jesus intentionally goes looking for Philip. When Jesus finds him, he announces, “Follow me” (1:43). That’s all we have to go by but evidently that’s all it takes. Philip joins the ranks of Jesus’ disciples.

Philip tells his friend Nathaniel, who is sitting under a fig tree, “We have found the one Moses and the prophets wrote about—Jesus of Nazareth” (1:45). Nathaniel is rather disparaging about Jesus’ hometown. “Nazareth! Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (1:46). His adverse reaction may be related to the fact that Nathaniel hails from a neighboring town called Cana. Nazareth and Cana are rival villages. I’ll bet their high schools were rivals also.

I was born in a small Ohio town so I know all about small town rivalry. My high school in the village of Canfield was a rival to nearby Poland High School. So, I can imagine myself saying, “Poland! Can anything good come out of Poland?”

Philip doesn’t argue with his friend. “Come and see for yourself,” he says.

Jesus sees Nathaniel and gives him a shout-out: “Here’s a true Israelite in whom there is no guile” (1:47). There’s not a false bone in his body.

“How do you know me?” Nathaniel asks. “I saw you sitting under the fig tree before you talked with Philip,” Jesus said (1.48). This is getting spooky. This means Jesus saw Nathaniel sitting under a fig tree when he was out of sight. Nathaniel exclaims, “You are the Son of God, the King of Israel” and becomes his disciple.
Jesus tells Nathaniel, in so many words, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.” Jesus continues, “You will see the heavens open and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (1:51). Jesus correlates the Genesis account of Jacob’s ladder dream of angels going up and down on a ladder between heaven and earth to his own life mission. Jesus descends from heaven to earth to show us the way to the Father. He will condescend even further in his death on the cross. After his death and resurrection, he will ascend to God’s right hand to become the everlasting point of contact between God and humanity. He will serve as our go-between, our mediator.

This first chapter of John is loaded with titles for Jesus. To John the Baptist, Jesus is the Passover Lamb who takes away the sin of the world (1:29, 35). To Andrew, he is our Rabbi (1:37) and anointed Messiah (1:41). To Philip, he embodies Old Testament Scripture—the one Moses and the prophets spoke about (1:45). To Nathaniel, he is the Son of God and the King of Israel (1:49).

Let’s go back to verse 43 of our story: “Jesus found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me’” (1:43). Two things strike me about this verse. First, Jesus found Philip. Jesus must have gone out of his way to find him. It causes me to wonder, did I find Jesus or did Jesus find me? I doubt I could have found Jesus had he not found me.

The second thing that impresses me about this verse is Jesus’ simple directive, “Follow me.” To follow someone is to let that person lead the way. I think of the children’s game “Follow the Leader,” in which one child assumes the lead and it’s the job of the other children to mimic everything the leader does.

John’s gospel is replete with references to following Jesus. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness” (8:12). He likened following him to sheep trailing their shepherd, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me” (10:27).

How do we follow someone we cannot see? We can’t follow Jesus on Twitter or Facebook, so how do we keep close to Jesus?
I have three suggestions. First, we can read about Jesus. We can learn his priorities and discover what’s important to him. That’s why we make such a big deal out of reading *The Story*. We’ll devote a spring and summer’s worth of sermons to telling Jesus’ stories and probing what they can mean for our lives. Join us this year as we learn what it means to follow Jesus.

Second, we can pray to Jesus. This week, I had a conversation with someone who wanted to be introduced to someone I know. I told this person to use my name in making introductions with this person. Jesus told us whenever we approach God to use his name. That’s why we always pray in Jesus’ name. He’s our point of contact with God. He’s our go-between, our mediator.

If you are new to this matter of following Christ, I urge you to start at the beginning. Ask this Jesus into your life. He wants to make his home in your heart.

Third suggestion, seek out his followers. Spend time with those who earnestly seek to follow Jesus. We talk in this church a great deal about the importance of spiritual friends. Don’t try to go it in faith alone.

Jesus said to Simon, “You will be called Cephas or Peter,” meaning *rock*. If you know anything about Peter’s life, he is anything but a rock. He comes off as rather wobbly. When Jesus is arrested, Peter is afraid to associate any longer with Jesus. We read this chilling account in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), “Peter followed Jesus at a distance” (14:54). I said earlier keeping our distance from Jesus can have damaging effects. After we read that Peter keeps his distance, we are told that Peter denies any association with Jesus three times in quick succession.

Some of us follow Jesus at a distance. We don’t want him to get too close. We’d like to keep him on retainer just in case we need him. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said long ago that what Jesus wants are followers, not admirers.
In my younger years, I used to sing the hymn *I Have Decided to Follow Jesus*. This song came back to me this week as I prepared this sermon. This hymn was made popular in Billy Graham’s heyday and underscores the importance of making a decision to follow Jesus. While the words and melody are well known to me, I didn’t know its origin before this week. I doubt I will ever sing this hymn quite the same way again.

A Welsh missionary went to Northern India in the 1880s to introduce Christ to a region hostile to Christianity. A family—husband, wife and two children—came to profess faith in Christ. The village chief threatened the man’s family unless he renounced his faith in Christ. The man said, “I have decided to follow Jesus and there is no turning back.” The man’s two children were felled with arrows. This chief threatened the man’s wife with the same fate unless he recanted. He said, “Though none go with me, still I will follow,” and they killed her in the same fashion. As they took aim at her husband, his dying words are stunning, “The cross before me the world behind me.” When this chief and villagers witnessed this family’s courageous witness, they decided to follow Jesus.

Lest you think I am merely talking about something that happened long ago and far away, I remind you of the plight of fellow Christians living in places such as Syria, Egypt and Nigeria today. Some of them have decided to follow Jesus at enormous cost to themselves and their families. Don’t follow Jesus at a distance. Follow him close!