

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany
January 21, 2018
Mark 1:14-20
The Rev. Carenda Baker

In 1992 the hit movie “Sister Act” was released, starring Whoopi Goldberg and Maggie Smith. Whoopi Goldberg plays Deloris Van Cartier, a Reno lounge singer. Maggie Smith plays the Reverend Mother of a convent connected to St. Catherine’s, a poor urban Roman Catholic parish in a tough neighborhood of San Francisco. Deloris’ life for awhile becomes entwined with the sisters of the convent and the people in the surrounding neighborhood. The movie is punctuated with catchy musical offerings throughout. One of the final songs sung by the sisters is titled, “I Will Follow Him.” It starts with a sweet, smooth melodious line: “I will follow him, follow him wherever he may go. And near him I always will be, for nothing can keep me away. He is my destiny. // I will follow him. Ever since he touched my heart I knew, there isn’t an ocean too deep, a mountain so high it can keep, keep me away – away from his love.” Then the song makes an abrupt transition into a rousing chorus of “I’ll follow, I’ll follow, I’ll follow”. It’s a movie worth your time if you haven’t seen it, and worth watching again if you have.

If you’ve done much reading of the gospels, it seems like here, too, “the follows” show up frequently. Jesus seemed always to be calling people to follow. It was not the practice in his day for rabbis to go in search of students. It was those who seriously wanted to learn who went in search of a rabbi. But in the gospels, a good number of the stories end with those familiar words – and Jesus said, “Follow me.” Here in Mark, he says it to Simon Peter and Andrew while they are casting their net into the sea. “Follow me, and I will make you to become fishers of people”, is the more literal and accurate translation. He saw James and John in their boat mending the nets. Immediately Jesus called them, and they follow. Matthew the tax collector, was sitting in his tax booth; the paralyzed were sitting on their mats. Saul was sitting, struck blind on the road to Damascus. Follow, follow, follow. There is a lot of emphasis in the gospels on that word “follow”, sometimes stated explicitly:

“And they dropped their nets and they followed.”

“And they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and they followed”.
And those he healed, “they picked up their mats and they followed.”

It’s not so difficult to become a Christian. I was baptized in 1960 when I was five and a half months old. I made a public faith commitment giving my life to Christ at age 7. But

the following Jesus – now that’s the really hard part. Calling ourselves Christian is one thing. And being disciplined in the way of Christ is quite another.

It used to be that becoming a Christian took time, effort, and intentionality. In the days of the early church, in its first two to three hundred years, becoming a Christian required a two to three year study period called the catechumenate before one could be baptized, join the community of the faithful and share in the Holy Eucharist. Taking on that name and identity of “Christian” meant literally to start a new life as part of a distinctly different community.

When the emperor Constantine declared Christianity the state religion of Rome in 325, things relaxed considerably for Christians. Some have said this was when Christianity crawled in bed with empire, with government. Over the centuries, that long period of intentional learning in community to follow Jesus’ way has gotten shorter and shorter. Now it might require a few months of study for adults, and perhaps close to a year of classes for youth, who frequently engage during their teenage years to prepare to make their confirmation as Christians. A good number promptly drop out of church, as if they have graduated from discipleship school.

Some of us do experience clear moments of conversion that happen in an instant. People can and do experience God’s redeeming love immediately, in a heartbeat. Maybe it happened that way for you, or you’ve heard that testimony from others. Becoming a Christian can happen quickly – the initial intellectual assent and the heartfelt “yes” to God in faith. But the call to discipleship – that takes a lifetime. The invitation to follow comes to us again and again, sometimes like a ringing in our ears, with a strong and clear convicting power. The call to follow can be like a thorn in our side, a pebble in our shoe, annoying really, and relentless.

The ninth chapter of Luke’s gospel tells that Jesus is on his way out of a Samaritan village. He has set his face toward Jerusalem and the events which will lead to his death. Jesus is approached by some who want to follow him, but they have some caveats. “I will follow you Lord. I will. But first there is a funeral I have to attend, and then I promise I’ll be back and ready to go with you.”

And another says, “I will follow you Lord, but first I need to run by the house and get a few things and say good-bye to the folks. I’ll be right back.”

In this moment in Luke’s gospel, Jesus’ response sounds harsh. “No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Ouch! We would rather Jesus treat us with kid gloves, be polite, and appreciate all we do. But Jesus wasn’t about being nice. Jesus was about transforming lives through

God's radical love. Jesus insists on being persistent, calling over and over to us so that we might become the new creation that God intended us to become. "I will make you to become fishers of people." This is not about adding one more task to our "to do" list that we can check off. Not simply another good deed done for someone else. "Fish for people. Got it. Check." This call to follow Jesus is about being formed to take on a particular, and to the world, a peculiar looking identity.

In reality, we all have moments when our following becomes tepid, lukewarm. We would prefer simply to do the best that we can, and not be inconvenienced or asked to stretch our understanding or cross any boundaries of comfort. And Jesus keeps whispering, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of people." This is what presiding bishop Michael Curry means when he talks about "the Jesus movement." Becoming fishers of people.

Consider one of those first disciples Jesus called, Peter. No one was more familiar with the persistent call to follow than Simon Peter. Eager and willing, Peter responds with an unambiguous "yes" to Jesus' first invitation to follow. Leaving his life as a fisherman behind, he eagerly accepts this invitation to be made (to become) a fisher of people, though he had no idea what that meant. Over and over Peter is faced with opportunities to think about that initial decision. Peter faces a steep learning curve. Peter promises to be faithful, to follow Jesus even to death, but at crunch time, fear for his own life takes hold of him and while Jesus is facing trial, Peter denies even knowing Jesus. And yet, after his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus meets Peter on the shore of the lake in Galilee, at Tabgha, calling to Peter and the others from their fishing, to come meet him on the beach for a breakfast he has prepared for them. Jesus talks privately with Peter – "Do you love me?" There in heart-wrenching moments of truthful challenge, Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" "Yes, says Peter, you know I love you." "Then tend my lambs. Feed my sheep. Follow me."

"I will follow him. Follow him wherever he may go. And near him I always will be. For nothing can keep me away. He is my destiny. . . There isn't an ocean too deep, a mountain so high it can keep, keep me away – away from his love."

No matter how much we have failed to heed the call to follow, no matter how often we have said yes when we really meant to say no, no matter how many times we sincerely wanted to follow, but didn't know what that meant exactly, or how to do it exactly, or what the cost would be exactly, no matter how many times we have disappointed God and disappointed ourselves and others in the process, Jesus is always there with an outstretched hand, offering yet one more personal invitation, "Follow me."

I hope you will join us in the parish hall immediately following this morning's worship service for the annual parish meeting. We have begun our third year of ministry together here at Trinity. You will read in my report – what I call “The rector's state of the church” address, that we have many strengths as a congregation. We are blessed and our best response is gratitude. And it is time now for us to focus more deeply and intentionally, beyond the task of doing good deeds for others. We are called to be more than a Christian social service agency. It is time to look at our identity as a congregation – who we are called to become in Christ. I propose we need to deepen our focus on learning what it means to follow Jesus for life, to be lifelong students of Jesus and his way. This means reflecting theologically on how we are living as Christians - in the way we treat and care for each other here, in our families, and workplaces, in our leisure activities and in our common relationships with the community, nation, and world.

“I will follow him. Ever since he touched my heart I knew, there isn't an ocean too deep, a mountain so high it can keep, keep us away, away from his love.”

This is the good news. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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