

If you've been with us the last four Sundays, you've heard us talking about cultivating life in Christ. Week after week we've been encouraging one another to participate in God's cultivating work by way of the spiritual practices--silence, solitude, praying, reading Scripture--these practices keep us open and receptive to God.

Last week I called each of you to make a commitment to practice certain spiritual disciplines and over 200 of you responded. Some of you have brought cards back with you this weekend, and others of you will be filling them out in your small groups--you can get those into us whenever they are ready. If you didn't receive a card but would like one, they are available at the information desk.

Throughout this year, we are going to be asking you to share your stories with us: *how are these spiritual practices connecting you to God? Where are you experiencing difficulty and frustration? Where are you experiencing movement and growth?*

And so, while I am not going to be speaking about spiritual disciplines today, all throughout this year we are going to be returning to this idea of cultivating life in Christ.

Next week I am going to launch a new series that will continue throughout most of this next ministry year. The series will focus on Jesus' famous *Sermon*--what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount.

But this morning I am going to be preaching a sermon that functions as a transition from where we've been to where we are going. For those of you who are movie enthusiasts, think of it as a *prequel*. This morning's message has been burning on my heart, and I need to

give voice to it--it's a word that all of us will need to grapple with if Jesus' *Sermon* is going to have any impact on our lives.

I've heard it said that every preacher only has three or four sermons in them--three or four themes that they come back to again and again. For some it's the love of God, for others it's healing and restoration, for still others it's the call to mission. I'm not sure that I've been preaching long enough to identify each of my own themes, but I'm certain about at least one.

The message I'm going to preach today is one that many of you have heard me preach before--the words will be arranged differently but the message will be the same. This is a message I believe with all of my heart, a message that Jesus calls me to day, after day, after day.

And based on the image now before you on the screen (ducklings following a mother duck), can anyone guess what I will be preaching about this morning?

Jesus' voice calls out across the centuries--to me, to you, to the world-- and He speaks two important words: *Follow Me*. Jesus' voice is but one among many. We all follow someone or something; each of us pursues someone or something. I wonder, *who are you following? What are you pursuing?*

What we believe about Jesus is important, but what we believe is rendered useless unless we follow Him. The decision to follow Jesus is not a one time decision--it's an every day, every hour, every moment decision. Jesus has to do with life, your life, my life, every-day-life. The decisions we make, the things we pursue, and the way

we pursue them--all of it reveals who we are following. The question is, *will you follow Jesus today?*

I'd like to invite you to open your Bibles with me to the book of Luke. If you are going to use the blue Bible in front you, you can find our first text on page 1597 (Luke 5:1-11).

*One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. 2 He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.*

*4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." 5 Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." 6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.*

*8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." 11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.*

Up until this point in His life, Jesus had primarily worked with His hands--when it came to working with wood and stone, Jesus was an expert. But when it came to boats, nets, and fish, Peter was the expert--he knew how to fish, when to fish, where to fish.

So imagine spending a night fishing, coming back home empty-handed, and having an expert carpenter tell you how to do your job. Would we respond as well as Simon Peter?

I wonder, how often do we underestimate Jesus' expertise when it comes to the living of our lives? How often do I assume that I know better? Sometimes I forget that I'm neither alone, nor living for myself. Simon responds, "*but because You say so, I will let down the nets.*" Because You say so.

*Why does anyone follow anyone?* Those who live under a dictatorship follow because of the threat of punishment, pain, or death. But apart from threat, why does anyone voluntarily follow anyone? I suppose it happens when we recognize that someone knows more than we do.

If my friend Jayson comes over to my house and points out something that needs attention, I listen--Jayson is an expert builder, he knows what to look for, he knows how to build. We listen to our doctor, accountant, and physical trainer because they can see what we cannot.

As many of you know, Pastor Dave and Pastor Mardi are a part of our Senior Leadership Team. Dave and Mardi are brilliant leaders--I consider myself blessed to work with them. When they speak, I

listen. At times I completely alter my thoughts and plans because of something they've said. Isn't that the wise thing to do?

Jesus is the most brilliant leader ever. Both God and man, Jesus knows more, sees more, controls more, and loves more than anyone. To follow my own way, or any way, other than His way, no longer makes sense to me. *Does it make sense to you?*

Peter, Andrew, James, and John followed Jesus' instructions and they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. Not long after, Jesus asked them to do something more difficult by far: *"leave your nets, burn your boats, and come follow Me."* They would tell you it was the best offer they had ever received, and the best decision they ever made.

If your Bible is still open, please turn with me to Luke 9:57-62; you can find the text on page 1611. In this text we see Jesus interacting with would-be-followers. Let me read it for you:

*"57 As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." 58 Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." 59 He said to another man, "Follow me." But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." 60 Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." 61 Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family." 62 Jesus replied, "No*

*one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."*

The first man made a bold statement: "I will follow you wherever you go." Notice that Jesus didn't dismiss the man, but He did give him a dose of reality: *"There is a cost involved in following Me--you may have to lay down your creature comforts. Following Me won't always be easy; you may not immediately like where I lead you."*

The second man didn't approach Jesus, Jesus approached him saying *"Follow me."* And the man replied, *"Jesus I'd like to follow you, I really would, but I've got another commitment I need to honour first--it's really important. It's just not a good time for me right now Jesus, but once I've got things sorted, you can count on me to follow."*

How many times have we tried to make this same bargain with Jesus? I wonder, when will the condition of your life be perfect for your complete surrender to Jesus' will and His way? Will it ever feel like the "right" time?

David Benner writes, "We want love without sacrifice--without the risk and expense of the surrender of self-control and determination. God cannot accept such a bargain."<sup>1</sup> We might say, *"Jesus, be reasonable; surely something is better than nothing. I will follow you as much as I can, as long as I have the freedom to pursue my own*

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<sup>1</sup> David Benner, *Desiring God's Will*, 40.

*way from time to time. Jesus, can't I sign up to be a part-time follower?"*

The third man promises to follow Jesus *after* he settles things at home. In commenting on this text, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "The disciple places himself at the Master's disposal, but at the same time retains the right to dictate his own terms."<sup>2</sup> I must say this plainly: *this isn't discipleship.*

*If we're not willing to follow Jesus today, what makes us think it will be any different tomorrow?* Jesus' uses an analogy that had instant connection with His audience. When ploughing in rough and rocky terrain, the wise farmer needs to focus on what lies ahead. The one who looks back, who fixes their attention on secondary things, risks being knocked off course.<sup>3</sup>

Let's look at one final Scripture, Luke 18:18-23, page 1629 in the blue Bible. Allow me to summarize it for you.

A ruler asked Jesus about eternal matters, namely, how to be sure that God would welcome him into eternal life. And Jesus gave him a standard answer--don't commit adultery, don't murder, steal, or lie--in other words, align your life with God's life. I suspect the ruler was

pleased with Jesus' answer--he was already doing these things and he told Jesus so. But here's where the story turns.

Jesus tested the man's fundamental allegiance saying, "*You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor; and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*" It was a test, a test of allegiance, a test that would reveal the primary pursuit of his heart: wealth or life with God? In the end, the ruler walked away with his head downcast. As much as he longed for life with God, his love affair with money was greater still.

**There can only be one great love in your life--one center around which everything else will rotate.** *What is your great love?* Wealth is not the only rival god--friends, family, work, sport, art--they all cry out for our allegiance.

God doesn't want to eradicate all other loves, instead, He intends to focus our one great love. Thomas Merton writes, "Life is shaped by the end you live for. You are made in the image of what you desire."<sup>4</sup> In the words of David Benner, God longs for us to discover "the freedom of desiring nothing more than God".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost Of Discipleship*, 61.

<sup>3</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, 285-286.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thoughts In Solitude*, 55.

<sup>5</sup> Benner, 80.

The wealthy ruler didn't see it coming, but then again, few of us do. We come to Jesus asking for a little help--for strength, blessing, favour, or maybe an easy escape out of an especially difficult situation. But what we aren't prepared for, what none of us expect, is for Jesus to make an absolute claim on our lives as Lord and Master. We were hoping to find an all-powerful-genie, but we are confronted with anything but.

In contrast to this wealthy ruler, the Bible holds out the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus. She let go of something that we consider to be our most basic right--the right to self-control. Mary was found willing when God interrupted her plans; Mary trusted that God knew best.<sup>6</sup>

Consider the "ask" God made of her: her life plan would be completely re-written, her reputation would be shattered, and her upcoming marriage would be put in jeopardy by a supernatural pregnancy that few would believe or understand. But Mary responded to God saying, "*I am the Lord's servant...May your word to me be fulfilled.*"<sup>7</sup> As one author suggests, Mary is the first Christian, the first to surrender to her life (her womb) to Jesus.

Jesus invites us into whole-hearted surrender of our goals, plans, and desires--He asks for nothing less. But what we find is that Jesus' invitation to follow is actually an invitation into a full, meaningful, significant, life.

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<sup>6</sup> Benner, 42.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:38.

<sup>8</sup> James 2:14-26.

This invitation greets us every day, every moment. "*Come to me Mark, I know you are weary and burdened, follow me and I will give you rest. Mark, follow me and I will lead you in peace and joy. Mark, I have loved you with an everlasting love, I have good in store for you, follow Me and find satisfaction for your soul.*"

In other moments, I hear His invitation differently: "*Mark, you can't think your way through this present difficulty, stress, challenge, or pain--you're flying blind--follow Me, because I know where you need to go.*" Or, "*Mark, you're going your own way again, can't you see that you're heading off course? Return to Me, follow Me.*" **My dear people, we are not diminished by following Jesus, we are enlarged.**

In the Scriptures we've looked at today, you may have noticed that Jesus didn't invite anyone to "*believe*" in Him--He invited them to follow. That's not to say that what we believe is unimportant--it is an essential component to life with Jesus.

But knowing all the right things about Him doesn't make me a disciple--the disciple is the one who follows the Master. You show me how you live and I'll tell you who, or what, you believe in. A faith that lives in the mind alone is no faith at all--it's dead, or at the very least, it's dying.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus' voice calls out across the centuries--to me, to you, to the world-- and He speaks two important words: *Follow Me*. Will you follow Him today?

### **Conclusion**

An idea can be a powerful thing--once it takes root, it cannot be defeated until it meets a stronger idea. Alexander Graham Bell had an idea that changed the world--he invented the first practical telephone, and instant, worldwide communication, became possible. His idea has changed the way we function in the world.

The idea that a person's value can be determined by the colour of their skin, or gender, is a powerful idea--it once ruled the day in history and geography. But this idea met a stronger one--the idea that all men and women are created equal. These days, in most places, racial and gender inequality is no longer tolerated.

*An idea can be a powerful thing--it begins small, like a mustard seed, but it can take over a mind, a family, a church, a city, a country. Once an idea takes root, it can change the way the world thinks and behaves.*

Jesus had an idea; He talked about it everywhere He went: *the kingdom of God*. Better than anyone, Jesus knew what the Father was like. Better than anyone, He knew what life could be like with God at the helm.

Jesus believed that there is no better life than the life that exists in heaven. In heaven, God's way is the way--it's a life where love rules

the day, where peace is constant, and joy abounds. In heaven, all of life is perfectly aligned with God's life.

It's a wonder that Jesus would be willing to leave a place like that, isn't it? Well, Jesus had an idea, an idea that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all held in common. Their idea was for the life of heaven to invade earth.

And, so, Jesus taught His followers to pray, *Father, may Your name be hallowed, may Your kingdom come, and Your will be done on earth as in heaven*. And Jesus' followers did more than pray, they aligned their life with the life of heaven and the ripple effect began in Jerusalem and spread across the known world.

Jesus' *Sermon* is filled with ideas like this one--so counter-cultural, so "backwards," that it wasn't immediately obvious that His ideas were in fact brilliant. At first they sounded foolish: blessed are the meek, turn the other cheek, love your enemies and do good to those who hate you--*what? Was He half-mad?*

No, He was brilliant, revolutionary, and not of this world. Through Jesus' *Sermon*, we are invited into a way of life that aligns with life as it is in heaven. From Jesus' perspective, embracing God's Kingdom (His rule, His will, His way) amounts to embracing abundant life--a life that is meaningful now and will satisfy us forever.

It's amazing how often we live our lives at the subconscious level--we live without thinking about how we are living, where we are going, and what matters most. In Jesus' *Sermon*, He talks about life's most important relationships, about the attitudes of our heart, about

money, sex, fear, and wisdom--in other words, He talks about everyday life.

There's always someone boasting about their "new" idea, an idea that will change the world. Take for instance Apple's new operating software, *iOS7*--it promises "*a whole new perspective*." If you ask me, they are over-selling things--I suspect life will pretty much go on as it has before. Do you think in 2000 years, anyone will be talking about *iOS7*? Nearly 2000 years have past since Jesus preached His *Sermon*, but people are still talking about it today--it's still relevant, still revolutionary, still life-giving.

*Jesus' ideas about the Kingdom are powerful--it begins small, like a mustard seed, but it can take over a mind, a family, a church, a city, a country. Once His ideas takes root, it can change the way the world thinks and behaves.*

Next week, we're going to slowly start chewing on His *Sermon*, and who knows what might happen? Your mind might change. Your family might change. This church, our city, our country might change. It's happened before. I pray that it happens again...starting with us.

**Pray**