

The four Gospels have preserved for us stories about how the first disciples began to *follow* Jesus long before his death and resurrection. These stories recall the distant past, but they can also describe the present. They tell what happens with the original disciples of Jesus, but they also illustrate what happens with his subsequent disciples, even with you and me.

Sprinkled throughout today’s gospel story are geographical references that are not mentioned by accident. They provide an important dimension to the story, showing how Jesus’ actions are sure to surprise us. Once John the Baptist’s ministry is over and done with, the time is ripe for the ministry of Jesus to begin. He doesn’t go to some holy place or to a religious center. Instead, he withdraws to secular Galilee, Galilee of the Gentiles, as Isaiah called it, a place where, according to Jewish belief, pure faith was distorted and lost.

Another name for this district is “Zebulun and Naphtali.” Centuries before Jesus, this part of Israel was the first to experience God’s devastating wrath inflicted by the Assyrians. Matthew sees Zebulun and Naphtali as the place where salvation dawns. It is to Capernaum, a city of this region, located on the Sea of Galilee, that Jesus goes. Practically every “In the Footsteps of Jesus” tour of Israel begins in Capernaum and then goes southward to Bethlehem and Jericho, culminating in the city of Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead. Capernaum, mind you, is no quiet fishing spot like the places on the Shenango river that my dad took me so he could teach me how to fish. Capernaum is a bustling city. Commercial fishing amounts to big business there. When I was in Capernaum, I had fish for breakfast! From the fishermen of Capernaum Jesus calls his first disciples.

So, who are they? Two pairs of brothers: Simon and Andrew, James and John, brothers who work shoulder to shoulder in the family business. Such ordinary circumstances are not rejected by the call of Christ; they are honored and enhanced. Brothers in the flesh become brothers in the faith. Those who harvest the wealth of the sea are made into fishers of people. You see, Jesus does not

go to some perfect place in search of disciples. He goes instead to a rather questionable and imperfect place—whose historical and religious wounds cry out to be healed. Friends, if you have come to church today looking for the healing of your wounds, you've come to the right place because Jesus enters into the bustle and business of our ordinary lives.

Jesus does not follow the rabbinic practice of waiting for students to approach him. Instead, he interrupts people at their work. And when he calls people to relationship with him, he does not forget that they are bound to others through ties of love and labor. As he speaks to James and John, Simon and Andrew, so he speaks to us, through our personal circumstances, not in spite of them.

Christ calls his disciples as they are. They do nothing to deserve his invitation. We read no accounting of the merits of these four men, but only of Jesus' call. Perhaps he calls people with glaring weaknesses because they are better personalities through whom his power is made known. The history of the Apostles, the history of every Christian, when read carefully shows that Christ does not call those who are fit, but makes fit those whom he calls. Only those ready and willing to receive this transformative gift of faith can hear his call.

Matthew's interest in describing the call of the first disciples is clearly not in the psychology of conversion. Nor does he have an interest in whether or not these men have had previous contact with Jesus. What captures the attention of Matthew is the creative power of what Jesus says and does that brings about a new creation. In the beginning, the voice of the Lord called into existence one type of creature after another. Now his voice calls into existence these new creatures. Galilean fishermen are transformed into fishers for all humanity.

The key verse in today's passage is Matthew 4:19, where Jesus says to his intended disciples, "*Come follow me...and I will send you out to fish for people.*" Jesus's command to *follow* is clearly significant to all four of the Gospel writers. In Mark 10:21 he says, "*One thing you lack...Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*" In Luke 9:23 he says, "*Whoever wants to be my*

*disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”* And in John 10:27 he says, *“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”*

The key word in these Scriptures is the Greek word for follow, *akoloutheō*. It occurs 89 times in the New Testament yet it appears only once in Paul’s writings. Generally, Paul avoids the language of *following* Jesus. I wonder why that is? Did Paul think the terminology was only appropriate for those who could *literally* follow Jesus in his steps during his ministry on earth? This idea—that while Jesus was here in his bodily presence the words *“follow me”* carried a special meaning—is probably true. It refers to Jesus’ movements. His physical movements and his behavioral movements on the ground, because in today’s Scripture when he says to the fishermen, *“Follow me,”* they left their nets and walked with him (Matthew 4:18–22). When he said to Levi, *“Follow me,”* he left his tax booth, left everything and he walked with him (Luke 5:27–28). The words *“follow me”* were used not only because he was teaching them what they should do, but also because he was an itinerant preacher who would *show* them by his deeds how to live and how to serve, as they followed him.

Let’s think about a few things that may shed light on why the Apostles didn’t make a habit of describing believers as “followers” of Jesus, which of course is how many people today describe their relationship with Jesus. In fact, I may want to throw a flag on the play that after Jesus’ resurrection, the Apostles would’t call Christians “followers of Jesus.” Personally, I find it quite helpful to describe my life of faith as “following Jesus” and because of what Jesus says in John 21, which we’ll get to in just a moment. Here are a few observations:

1. The Christian life begins with death. In John 13, *Simon Peter asked him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus replied, “Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.” Peter asked, “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”* Jesus, in essence, was saying, “No, you can’t, and you won’t.” What did Jesus mean when he said, *“you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward”*?

First, he meant, “I’m about to die on the cross, and you’re not ready to follow me there. You’re going to deny me three times, Peter.” He says that in the next verse. But what did he mean when he says, “*but later you will follow me,*” as if to say, “Later you’ll have the courage to die with me”? Interestingly, in John 21, after the resurrection. Jesus says to Peter, “*Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.*” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “*Follow me!*”

Which I think is the answer to the question of what Jesus meant back in chapter 13 when he said, “*later you will follow me.*” He was saying “I’m going to die, but you’re not ready. Afterward you will follow me into death.” Therefore, on the one hand, Jesus declares, “We have come to a point in my life here and now where you can’t follow me anymore, not in the ordinary sense. I’m going to die and leave. But if you want to think in those terms, the way to think is that you will follow me into death: you will one day die with me, Peter.” The Christian life begins by dying with Jesus, according to the Lord himself.

2. Second, Christ dwells in his people. With the departure of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the dominant way of thinking about the relationship between Jesus and his people is not that we *walk around* behind him, but that he dwells in us, and we in him, and we enjoy union with him. Union with Christ by the Holy Spirit replaces the relation to Christ by physical following. Jesus said in John 14:16&17, “*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.*” I think that’s a way of saying that Jesus is with them now, and they can follow him around, but later they will follow him *by his Spirit* who is in them. And so do we.

3. Third. We look back to Jesus’s earthly ministry and see that with Jesus’ departure into heaven, his earthly life is conceived of as an *example* that we look back on in order to follow, rather than looking ahead of us as someone to

be followed. We imitate by looking back at Jesus. For example, take 1 Peter 2:21: *“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.”* You see, there has been a clear, historical reversal of the way we orient to Jesus. His life and teaching are fixed in history as an event and a pattern (in the past) that we can look back on, and in that sense, we can follow.

4. Fourth, we follow Jesus today by adhering to the Scriptures. The Apostles in particular, provided us with an interpretation of Jesus’ death and resurrection and the way the church now should live in light of those events. That body of teaching, called the New Testament, is a witness to be followed. Jesus himself would not want us to isolate his earthly life and teachings for us to follow. Instead, the totality of the New Testament, informed by the Old, is the charter for the church’s life today. It is what we are to follow, and in doing so, in one sense, we are following Jesus, since he’s behind it, and through it, and in it.

*“Come follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people”* (v. 19). Just as living requires that we breathe, following Jesus is to engage in his mission. What a Christian is to do, what you and I are to do, is disarmingly simple. We are to *follow* Jesus. This releases us from a great many burdens. *Where we are* is no obstacle to Christ. *What we do* is no obstacle to Christ. *Who we are* is no obstacle to Christ. He calls us in our circumstances not in spite of them. Our lack of fitness is no obstacle.

Jesus does not look for us to be fit. Rather he makes us fit. Our call and our commission go together. By calling us, Christ equips us. He makes it possible for us to follow him, to participate in the mystery of his death and resurrection, and to make that extraordinary mystery visible to others. This is what every disciple is called to do—to “fish for people.”

Through our commitment to follow him wherever he goes, the Public Jesus of the Gospels becomes the Personal Jesus of our lives in whom we put our trust and live lives of faith that point others to him. Amen.