

Whom Do We Follow? What Do We Leave Behind?

Friends, old and new, each of us created and sustained by the fathomless love that is God, we arrive to this moment of reflection on this fifth Sunday of Epiphany. Individually and collectively, we continue to navigate our way through another long winter in pandemic times, finding ways to cope with weariness and seeking ways to thrive. As we face into a new week, I invite us to wonder together this morning, **whom do we follow and what do we leave behind?** Please pray with me.

God of all, we welcome you loving power to infuse us this morning. We join the Psalmist in these words of gratitude and trust:

*"I thank you with all my heart...
because of your love and faithfulness...
When I called, you answered me—
you made me bold and strong of heart...
God, your love is eternal;
don't abandon the work of your hands."*

O great creator and companion, as you move in our spirits and our intellects, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Fellow sojourners, Jesus said to Simon two millennia ago and Jesus says to each of us today, *"Don't be afraid; from now on you'll fish among humankind."* I spoke with our children moments ago about how Jesus was one who, oriented by his deep sense of being connected to and empowered by the all-embracing love that is God, gave himself completely to the work of welcoming others to know that same truth that we are all connected and empowered within the all-embracing love of God. Talk about a master fisherman! With the lure of love and the hook of empowering connection, Jesus has caught billions of human fish across the expanse of time. And now he invites us to also fish among humankind.

Today, Jesus invites us to examine our habits of discipleship.

To what extent are you following Jesus?

Who or what else are you following? Why are you following them or that?

What hinders you from following Jesus in the way of all-embracing and empowering love?

What do or will you leave behind as you follow Jesus?

Time and again, I am inspired to share lyrics of a song entitled “Follow Me” when speaking about scriptures that point to following Jesus. United Church of Christ pastor and singer songwriter Bryan Sirchio once wrote these words:

Am I following Jesus, or just believing in Christ?

'Cause I can believe and not change a thing

But following will change my whole life

The song points to the fact that we remember Jesus eighty-seven times in Christian scriptures as saying, “Follow me.” Another question we may ask ourselves today is this: **What do you need in order to take the next step – whether a small yet mindful change in a habit or a leap into a radically fresh start, leaving the familiar behind in order to follow Jesus?** What do you need in place in order to take the next step?

I have come to believe that fruitful leadership and followership have trust as their bedrock. During my years in outdoor ministry, facilitating groups working on ropes courses in the woods and challenging themselves as they cooperated together, I was introduced to a trust matrix that has had great impact and influence in my life as a daughter, mother, sister, friend and pastor. Before describing to you how the matrix is laid out, I have a few questions for us to have in mind:

- Do you feel more comfortable leading or following?
- As you move through your days, do you find yourself situated more frequently as a leader or a follower?
- As you ponder both your experiences as both a leader and a follower, consider where you and those you lead and follow fit within this trust matrix.

Along one axis runs competence and along the other axis runs benevolence or goodness. So the extent to which we may choose to trust someone will be affected by our experiences of them in these four boxes in the matrix. And the extent to which others might choose to trust us will likely be affected by their experience of us. So along an axis of competence and an axis of benevolence or goodness, we have people in our lives who are competent and benevolent. And we have people in our lives who are competent and mean. And we have people in our lives whom we experience as good, benevolent but less competent. And we encounter people in our lives whom we experience as unkind and incompetent. And likely we have been all of these things to people who have crossed paths with us. And surely, if we reflect, we know that we have tried to or needed to follow people who have fallen into all four boxes.

Are people experiencing us as benevolent and competent? Ideally, yes.

Are we choosing to trust people who are close to that way as well?

To what extent are you following Jesus?

And as you thought about that matrix, who or what else are you following and why?

What hinders you from following Jesus in the way of all-embracing and empowering love?

What do or will you leave behind as you follow Jesus?

We can learn from our own and our loved ones' experiences in 12-step recover groups about the power of having an accountability partner. Often in a group setting, someone has a sponsor or/and serves as a sponsor to someone else. It is so important to find those with whom we can explore our own ways of life, our own efforts to be disciples of the way of Jesus. In my own experience, I recently connected with my spiritual director and find that she is a person with whom I have honest conversations about the choices I am making and in what endeavors I am placing my energy. It can also help to have an honest accountability partner to help us see if we are leading and following in spaces of benevolence and competence in our next steps forward in following the way of Love. We heard:

'Jesus said to Simon [and Jesus says to each of us], "Don't be afraid; from now on you'll fish among humankind." And when they brought their boats to shore [and when we paused and docked the endeavors that are not currently empowering us toward more loving and life-giving connections], they [and we] left everything and followed him.'

Let us follow Jesus in the way of all-embracing and empowering love, catching others to do human life alongside us in that universal loving net.

Love is counting on us, friends. Amen.

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Psalm 138, Luke 5:1-11