

"Let the Journey Begin!"

John 1:43; Matthew 4:18-20; Mark 1:14-20

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For the past several weeks, we've been examining the outset of our Lord's ministry and how he began assembling his ministry team together, his group of disciples. Over the next few years, he will be instructing them as to the nature and demands of the kingdom of God and then sending them out as teachers and preachers on their OWN, introducing others to that SAME kingdom. According to JOHN'S gospel, Jesus seeks Philip out and simply says, "Follow me." In both MATTHEW'S and MARK'S account, we're told that while walking along the Sea of Galilee, Jesus spies two brothers, one named Simon and the other Andrew, casting their nets for fish. Seeing something in them, he walks straight up to them and issues the same order, "Follow me," adding, "and I will make you fisher of MEN." Without so much as an argument or inquiring where it is they are going, they obediently drop their nets and begin following him.

Now I'd like for us to jump ahead some three and a half years. Simon Peter and the others are once again fishing beside the same sea when the resurrected Jesus suddenly appears to them and repeats that VERY SAME directive- "Follow me." These words- "Follow me" thus become the FIRST as well as the LAST words that Jesus ever says to Simon Peter- to him who would eventually become his chief disciple and the first leader of the Early Church. Between that first call and the last, Jesus was continually saying- to Peter, to James, to John, to the rest of the disciples, to ANYONE who had ears to hear- "Follow me. Follow me. Follow me!"

Throughout his travels and in all his teachings, Jesus laid down just one requirement to become part of his vanguard--only ONE--and that was to FOLLOW HIM. Jesus didn't look for conformity among his followers. He didn't demand that everyone think the same way, speak the same message, or act alike- only that there be a willingness to leave their homes, to drop their nets, to abandon their plows, and then follow him wherever he might lead them. He never gave them a Sunday School exam, never investigated their private lives, never asked for a character reference, never once conducted an inquisition to weed out the faithful from the faithless, the disingenuous from the sincere, the orthodox from the heretic. He simply said "follow me" and that was all. He seemed to be saying, "Though you might not completely understand my words and my teachings, though my purpose and mission might remain obscure to you now, though my arrest and death may leave you confused and afraid, though there are times you may be so fearful for your own safety and security that you deny me and forsake me, CONTINUE to follow me- IN SPITE of all your questions, IN SPITE of all your doubts, IN SPITE of your frequent denials and moral failures. Just FOLLOW ME and one day, you WILL understand!" When Jesus said "Follow me," it was not so much an invitation as a COMMAND. He wasn't suggesting that they tag along a while to see if they like it and afterwards they could decide whether they wanted to commit to him or not. Rather, he was asking for a commitment from them, in effect saying "If you 'follow me,' if you leave everything else behind and make ME the supreme desire of your life, then I will introduce you to a new and qualitatively different kind of life, one that will

take you to places you never before dreamed of- I PROMISE you that!"

However, in order to REDEEM that promise, they'd have to learn one very important lesson- that it wasn't so much the DESTINATION they should concern themselves with but rather the JOURNEY ITSELF! The risks, the challenges, and the adventures involved, THAT was where their REAL education would begin- not in some renowned college or university but in the GREATER classroom we call the SCHOOL OF LIFE. He would take them down the highways and byways of Judea and Galilee to encounter people of every stripe- persons whom they never in their wildest imaginations EXPECTED to meet or even WANT to, such as those who lived in extreme poverty and as well as those excluded from their homes and families; people afflicted with deafness, blindness and lameness along with individuals of low standing such as lepers and tax-collectors, demoniacs and prostitutes. That's not exactly what they bargained for when they first signed up to follow Jesus, but over the next couple of years, they would discover all their previous perceptions and all their beliefs concerning God and God's kingdom would be turned upside down and inside out.

Now I regard each one of us as being on a great journey and I've shared some of the places my OWN journey has taken ME in some of my past sermons. Well it was during that odyssey that I learned the most important lesson of ALL- how it's not the DESTINATION we all think we're headed for that's of utmost importance but rather the JOURNEY ITSELF. I've NEVER given a whole lot of thought to the idea of heaven or hell, or what will happen to me when I die. And it's not that I'm unconcerned about such questions, but that I've come to learn that we can be so focused on where the goal line is that we end up missing the point of the RACE ITSELF, that our lives are to be lived NOW and it is during the COURSE of our journeying that our GREATEST LESSONS are to be learned.

I've been a member of AARP--the American Association of Retired Persons--for about twenty years now and in last month's magazine, there was an article entitled "The Trip That Changed My Life." In it, a group of celebrities were interviewed and asked to share the one travel experience in their life that changed them for good. One of them was the actor and activist George Takei who played Mr. Sulu in the early Star Trek television series. He said his life was changed around thirty years ago after he was invited to do a play at the legendary Edinburgh Festival in Scotland. He had always been about his work which at that time was the main thing in his life. He journeyed to Edinburgh to do the play but discovered that the REAL draw would become the city itself. Along with being an actor, he was also a jogger and he noticed that Edinburgh was one of those cities that can be easily explored on foot. Hence, when he'd go running each morning, he'd frequently stop to take in its history and spectacular views. He learned how this modern city was also still very much a medieval town filled with cobbled streets. Taking the time to enjoy the journey, he saw how it was situated among some of the most beautiful countryside in all God's creation. The experience helped him realize that there's more to life than just work or making money. He's returned many times since but now he says he does more walking, not just because he's older, but because he can take in the sights, visit with people, and experience what the country REALLY is like.

While living in California in the 1970's and early 80's, I experienced a SIMILAR

awakening. It was while living in San Francisco Bay area that I learned how to ride a motorcycle- a Honda 350. Eventually I graduated to something much bigger- a Yamaha 650. I was also in possession of a 1969 Triumph which I was in the process of restoring in addition to my regular car- a 1965 Triumph Spitfire sports car that I loved to bop around in. Naturally, my favorite biblical verse back then was, "And David's triumph roared throughout the land." It's been quite a few years since I was last on a bike but my love for them and the romance it represents has never left me. In the fall of 1979, I even took off from work for a two-week motorcycle trip up the California coast. I rode through Oregon and Washington and up into Victoria and Vancouver, Canada- it turned for me into the trip of a lifetime!

From those travels, I came to discover some very important lessons. I don't think I ever experienced a greater high than when I was riding down those beautiful freeways and back roads in California. Many times, I felt like I was the last American cowboy, traveling throughout the West with my sleeping bag on the back. Often, I'd just pull over to the side of the road or a rest area somewhere and sleep beside my bike like a cowboy would often sleep beside his horse- we developed that kind of symbiotic relation. Whether touring along the Pacific Coast or among the mountain passes of the Sierra Nevadas, I felt a oneness with nature and the world that I've never experienced since- a feeling of absolute freedom, a sense that those two wheels could take me anywhere and at any time. Furthermore, I knew I was never alone because I was confident that Christ was traveling right there beside me. Hence, I learned more important than getting somewhere fast was appreciating the journey itself. I was discovering how incredible this creation is as well as grew thankful to God for all those I encountered along the way. You can't experience that in a car because you're encased in a bubble of steel and glass, trying to get from one place to another in the fastest time possible, while on a bike, there's just you, nature, and the open road.

Another celebrity interviewed for that AARP article was the Fonz, Henry Winkler. He said the trip that changed HIS life was the first time he went fly-fishing on the Smith River in Montana. He and his wife along with a couple of friends spent a week doing that and he expressed how he couldn't even BEGIN to describe the sheer joy it brought him. He said the closest he has ever come to the divine was on a river where throughout that week, they fished, had lunch and dinner on the bank, and even slept beside it. Along the way, they'd pass bald eagles and moose. The sound of the rushing water, lapping against his waders or on the sides of their boat made anything they worried about simply dissipate. Mostly, they concentrated on the trout and how you have to be patient with them. Then, if fortunate enough to land one, he'd take a picture, give it a kiss, and return it to the stream for someone else to enjoy catching. It was like dying and going to heaven for him.

I too love to fish and for the first half of MY life, I was a bait or spinner fisherman. Growing up, we had a summer bungalow not far from the Jersey shore so I spent a good deal of time fishing in the Atlantic Ocean. Back then, I was only interested in catching fish- that was all, and the more the better. But then about thirty-five years ago, I discovered fly-fishing. Not only did my FISHING habits change, my LIVING habits began to change as well. You see, fly-fishing is so much more than the act of trying to catch fish- it is a science and an art form that requires real patience. When I was first introduced to the sport back in the mid-80's, I thought

you just threw a line in the water the same way you do a hook with a worm on the end of it and then you forgot about it until some hapless fish came by and decided to swallow it- the truth is anything BUT. I learned that fly-fishing involves not only using different fishing gear but it entails a completely different WAY to fish. You first need a line that floats and on the end of it, you tie what is known as a graduated leader. This consists of short pieces of nylon filament of varying thickness tied in such a way that it becomes thinner on the end. Making one involves mastering a variety of knots if one is to ever become a “complete angler.” Then you have to figure out what kind of fly to attach- a fly being an artificial lure that resembles the kind of insect life the fish happen to be eating at that moment. I tie my own flies and I find that that becomes just as much fun as the act of fishing itself. However, this requires that you have some knowledge of insect life and behavior. Conditions might call for a dry fly that floats, a wet fly that sinks, a nymph which resembles an insect in its larval stage, or perhaps a streamer- a fly that imitates a small fish. You have to choose the right size fly as well for one that is too big or too small may produce no results. Then you have to determine how you’re going to present the fly and where in the stream to cast your line. For this, you have to have some knowledge of stream conditions and trout habitat. I subsequently made several bamboo fly rods which I use depending upon the size of the stream I’ll be fishing or the kind of trout I’m fishing for- whether small brookies, rainbows, brownies, or perhaps large steelhead.

I’ve found that it takes years to become a really GOOD fly-fisherman but if you are patient with yourself and you listen to others more experienced, in time you discover that it imparts a joy and sense of satisfaction that regular worm or spinner fishermen often don’t have. Though catching fish can be fun, the overall experience of walking in nature at its most beautiful, casting a fly from one side of the stream to the other, trying to sneak up on a feeding trout, is every bit as exhilarating or MORE than merely tossing a line into the water. I mean, if you fish with bait or a spinner and then come home without anything to show for it, it becomes a wasted expedition; but if you FLY-FISH and return home empty handed, you are every bit as content regardless of whether you caught fish or not. As one friend of mine once put it, catching fish is only an excuse to experience the serenity that comes with fly-fishing itself.

You see, I find that when I fly-fish, I am in greater contact with my surroundings. There is nothing like seeing the steam coming off the stream in the early morning hours or hearing the sound of trout jumping for mayflies when a hatch is going on, or watching the sunlight filter through the trees as the sun begins to go down. I find the mere sound of the water gurgling as it rushes past your waders even THERAPEUTIC. It’s never about getting to a fishing hole and catching as much fish as you can. In fact, I’m what you call a “catch and release” fisherman which means that I usually return all the fish I do catch back into the water so that OTHERS can enjoy catching them as well. I can truly say that it’s been fly-fishing that has helped me to become a better “fisher of men” in my ministry.

But one final story to share: Not long after I began pastoring in Syracuse, NY, I quickly discovered that I needed some kind of recreational outlet to take me away from all busyness of church work and to help me restore some balance to my life. A member of the congregation told me he was selling his 25-ft. sailboat and after showing it to me, I instantly fell in love with it. I bought it and rented a berth for it on Onondaga Lake located right there in the city. I

joined the Onondaga Yacht Club and began participating in the weekly boat races. What I didn't know about the sport, people there were more than willing to teach me. When I took my first lesson, I discovered right away how sailing is very different from power boating. People who have motor boats always seem to be in a hurry to get to a particular spot, usually to their favorite fishing holes. The boat is really nothing more than a floating conveyance to help fishermen get there as fast as they can- and the FASTER the BETTER. They're not particularly interested in any of the sights along the way but rather fixated on getting to their favorite spots and catching fish, that's all. SAILING on the other hand is not concerned about getting somewhere (unless you are racing) but rather it's the enjoyment of the TRIP ITSELF that matters. To put it another way, it's not the goal or destination but the journey itself that counts most to the sailor. It is the art of learning to position the sails just right so that it catches the maximum amount of air. This involves tacking in a series of right angles so that you play the wind instead of the wind playing you. Like fly-fishing, it TOO is a science as well as an art form. When Rose and I began dating, we spent many wonderful evenings sailing on Onondaga Lake with the radio tuned to the baseball game and the cooler full of adult beverages, enjoying the cool breeze and the setting sun. We weren't going anywhere in particular- just enjoying the lake, the scenery, and of course each other. In that simple activity, I learned more about peace and relaxation and the restoration of the human spirit than I did from any seminary class.

One doesn't need to look very deep to discover the lesson here for us. Like Pilgrim in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, we all find ourselves on a great journey. When Jesus approached and directed his simple two-word command to US, that like those early disciples, we TOO should "follow him," he was inviting us to join him in an entirely new adventure in life, in that which has a very DEFINITE beginning but a very INDETERMINATE end. We all know where we've come from but few of us know where we are and certainly nobody knows where or when or how it will all end for us. What's IMPORTANT for us to remember is that we should mainly concern ourselves with the JOURNEY and leave the final destination to God for he alone knows how or when or where it will end for each one of us. Jesus said not to be anxious about tomorrow for tomorrow will look after itself- but to think only of the present day, of the journey we find ourselves on RIGHT NOW and to make THAT as qualitative and productive as we can. Hence, when we recognize that it's the JOURNEY and NOT the destination we should concern ourselves with, then we can begin to see life transformed into an arena for fellowship, for honest sharing and true caring and love to take place. Then we're not so rushed all the time, trying to get somewhere fast or catching the most fish that we wind up missing the very things that are REALLY essential in life. We can be consumed so easily with the goal or the destination that we ultimately miss the beauty of the journey itself, which would be to miss life ALTOGETHER.

So I want to encourage you in your OWN travels to remember to take your time and enjoy the ride. ABOVE ALL, remember that relationships are the MOST important things in life, ESPECIALLY your relationship to God. Concern yourself with the adventure before you while leaving the final destination to Him. Then you'll begin to see what's REALLY essential, what's TRULY important about life- that it simply consists of learning to love and care for one another even as Christ does for YOU. It will surely impart a peace and a joy unlike any you have ever experienced. Amen and amen...