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# Following Jesus

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A Sermon By  
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Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2017-01-22-AWW.mp3>.

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter  
Grace Episcopal Church  
The Third Sunday of Epiphany  
& Annual Meeting  
January 22, 2017

*And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."*

Matthew 4:19

The four men were going about their day. Two of them were fishing, casting their net into the sea, hoping to land something they could eat or sell. The other two were onshore, working alongside their father to mend the nets.

A man they didn't know, or at least, didn't know well, came walking by, and as he did, he called out to the men: "Hey you, follow me." And, with only those few words, Simon and Andrew, James and John, dropped what they were doing and left. They didn't hesitate for a moment. They didn't think about it for a minute. The text says they left immediately. They left their families, their friends, their work, to follow this man they barely knew, which has me wondering if the four men had any idea what they were getting into. They left to follow, but did they know what Jesus' words "follow me" really meant?

For the next three years, the disciples followed Jesus everywhere, and during that time, there were a lot of wonderful, beautiful moments: the Sermon on the Mount; the walking on water; the feeding of the five thousand. The disciples watched as Jesus changed peoples' lives, with a word or a touch. He lifted people up and gave them hope, offering everyone who came near a glimpse of the kingdom of God, and the disciples were there for all of it, experiencing the joy and the power.

But, the disciples' time with Jesus wasn't always that great. There were difficult moments and dark days, as well. Jesus' ministry brought tension and conflict with the Pharisees, the scribes, the Jewish authorities. Jesus and the disciples were watched constantly, were challenged constantly. Toward the end, one of their own became disillusioned with the cause, and decided to betray Jesus, handing him over to an angry mob carrying swords and clubs, and there was nothing the disciples could do about it. They were forced to stand by and watch, as their friend died.

The disciples could not have foreseen all of this that day by the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus called the disciples to follow, they had no idea who Jesus really was, where he would go, what he would say, what he would do, so there's no way they could have known what "follow me" really meant, but over time, they came to understand those words. The disciples came to realize what being a follower of Jesus was all about – they learned their role, their ministry, what they were supposed to do. They learned what Jesus wanted them to do, what Jesus called them to do.

How about you? Are you a follower of Jesus? What do those words mean to you? How do they affect your life? Can people tell you're a disciple?

Following Jesus is a lifelong quest. It is a journey we take inward and a journey we make outward. We journey inward to meet and understand Jesus. In order to follow him, we must have some sense of who Jesus was and what he was all about. We have to learn what he said and what he did. We have to know Jesus, really know Jesus, in our heart and soul. Then, we journey outward into the world, to share what we learned, patterning our lives after Jesus and reflecting his love. We go out into the world, and live what we believe, to practice what we preach.

As we all know, though, that's much easier said than done. Following Jesus is hard work. It can be inconvenient and challenging and force us outside our comfort zone. It's easy to love our family and friends, but it's hard to love our enemies. It's easy to pray for those who love and support us, but it's hard to pray for those who persecute us. It's hard not to worry, not to doubt and not to judge. It's hard to turn the other cheek, walk in someone else's shoes and love my neighbor as myself, especially when I don't agree with my neighbor, when my neighbor voted for someone else. It's hard to do all of that.

Then again, Jesus never said following him would be easy. Jesus said, *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."* And so, that is what we have to do.

We do the best we can to love our neighbor as ourselves. We do the best we can to show mercy and kindness and compassion. We do the best we can, knowing we won't always get it right and will sometimes come up short. We can't please all the people all the time. We're going to make mistakes; and, people will comment and critique and criticize, sometimes until they're blue in the face; and, we just have to live with that because we're not perfect, we're not Jesus, we're nowhere close; and, that's okay. We just pick up our cross, and we follow.

In the last week or two, we've seen how hard it is to follow Jesus in the controversy over the National Cathedral's participation in the inaugural festivities. As is tradition, the Bishop and Dean of the Cathedral invited the President to hold the inaugural prayer service at the Cathedral yesterday morning, and when the Cathedral choir was asked to sing at the inauguration itself, the Bishop and Dean accepted. These decisions erupted into a social media firestorm because many people believe the President's campaign rhetoric is the antithesis of Jesus' way. People from all sorts of backgrounds, but particularly Episcopalians, condemned the Bishop and Dean's judgment and asked them to reconsider. Online petitions garnered thousands upon thousands of signatures. The situation was so bad the Bishop and Dean had to issue not one but two statements each, defending their decisions. I do not presume to know what the right course of action was, what the right thing to do was, but I do believe, with all my heart, the Bishop and Dean thought they were following Jesus.

At Grace Church, that is exactly what we try to do – we try to follow Jesus the best we can. Because Jesus welcomed everybody, even eating with tax collectors and sinners, we feel called to be that "city on a hill" where people of all races and cultures can come to build their relationship with God and with others. Because Jesus had a special place in his heart for littlest ones, we actively embrace the voices of all children, both here at the church and at the Day School. And, because Jesus told us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, we do just that through our Homeless Ministry and Pennyworth Shop.

Grace is a community where we love and care for everyone, no matter who they are, and we march for justice, equality and the dignity of every human being, because that's how we follow Jesus. It's what makes Grace Church such a special place, and why people are drawn to this community. We're not perfect, because no church is, but we are doing the best we can. And, in those moments when we come up short, when we make mistakes, we love and forgive, and we trust, in God's never failing mercy, because that is the way Jesus.

Amen. .