

Sermon 18C: Experiencing the Presence and Power of God in Community

Introduction: Following has Its Challenges and Advantages

“Come, follow me,” Jesus says. Come, follow me.”

Over and over in the Gospels, Jesus invites people of all sorts and conditions;
Persons of all ages and backgrounds and abilities and disabilities;
Deeply spiritual people, agnostic people, uncommitted people to come, follow me;
By His words, by His deeds, by His life, by His death and resurrection;
Jesus beckons us through all time and space to “come, follow me.”

You and I have come to church, here at St. David’s this morning/evening because He’s called us;
We may not have known it was His voice or His encouragement;
It may have seemed more like one of our parents or family members or friends calling;
It may be that we’re here out of a call to a sense of duty
Or some curiosity about this Christianity thing that got us here today;
But be assured, He has called you and me to be here today.

Maybe it would be easier to accept the promise that Jesus Himself has called you
If He were physically in the room with us this morning (evening);
Looking into our eyes and gently saying, “Come, follow me.”

I suspect that some of us would be overjoyed at that kind of real time invitation;
Our lives aren’t going all that well at the moment, to be honest about it;
And we need a change, a real change.

And the thought that God would be interested enough in our lives, personally interested;
That God would come to us and call us out of the life we’re living to a new life;
Would be the gift that could change everything.

Our disappointments, our struggles, our doubts, our fears, our poor choices, our loneliness;
Would be wiped clean in an instant as we see that face;

And look into those eyes of love and understanding;
And hear that voice beckoning, come, follow me.

For others, Jesus' presence in the room and His invitation to come, follow me;
Would be a welcome encouragement to something we're already trying to do;
His invitation would a reminder, a confirmation that we can press on;
That we can continue to walk the path we're already trying to walk as His followers.

Like a parent thanking us for doing something particularly well or thoughtful;
Or a coach or a teacher or a manager or a client or a colleague admiring our work;
And encouraging us to more;
Jesus' personal invitation would rekindle our commitment and dedication.

For the rest of us, Jesus' physical presence and His personal call to come follow me;
Would be a challenge and mean some big changes in the way we're living our lives;
Most of us don't like to follow all that much, we like to lead;
Or we prefer to choose our own way as much as we can;
And the very idea of giving over control of our lives to God
And walking and living in a different way, for God's purposes first, and not our own;
Might be more than a little hard to accept, Jesus physically in the room or not.

That's the hardest part for me, whether my life is going well or not;
Whether I'm trying to follow Jesus or not, I like to decide, I like to choose;
So giving my life over to God's purposes;
And following can sometimes be a very hard decision.

But whichever place you find yourself this morning (evening);
Whether you're far from God;
Whether you need a gentle reminder or encouragement;
Or whether you're trying to lead when you're called to follow;

Know that Jesus is calling you and me, calling us away from the periphery of the Christian life;
Away from the edges, away from watching the life lived with God
To a deeper participation, to a closer following, to a life lived connected to God;
And to God's community of love and grace and purpose and hope.

Promise and Challenge of Following

I think sometimes that we forget or misconstrue the value and gift of the life
That Jesus is calling us to live.

I hear too many Christians talking and writing about following or living the Christian life
As live it or else;
Answer Jesus' call or God will not love you;
And your eternal destination may be a little warmer than you had hoped for.

Certainly, scare tactics can be an effective way of stirring people to answer Jesus' call;
And Jesus Himself has some challenging words about our lives lived for ourselves alone;
And what our end destination might entail;
But like light casting shadows, that's not Jesus' intent.

Jesus is calling us to a life that is far richer, more fulfilling, hopeful, and exciting
Than any life that we can live on our own apart from God and God's community.

In this new year at St. David's as we're focusing on the theme of *A Community for the World*;
I would describe the life that Jesus is calling us to live in three ways.

First, Jesus is calling us into a living relationship with God;
In Jesus' time and in our time today, too many people are living their lives alone;
Separated from the love and presence and community of God.

As Christians, we believe or give our hearts to the reality that God is in community;
That's what we mean when we talk about our Trinitarian God.

God is One and God is also the God in community

Father, Son, Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier we might say;

Though our language is so limited and we struggle to comprehend;

But the Christian view is that God is One and God is in community;

A community of love and creativity and connectedness;

And it is into this life that Jesus calls us to follow Him.

Jesus calls us into the life and community of God;

Opening the way for us to experience the source of light and love and holiness;

That God intends for everyone.

Second, Jesus is calling us into a particular community, the Church,

The living embodiment of Christ in the world, as St. Paul would say;

A community where are loved and can love others;

A community where we can find forgiveness and grace and offer them in return.

A community where we can exercise the gifts that God has given us

And revel in the gifts of others so that we can be a community

And offer our shared gifts for the life of the world.

I've been doing a lot of reading over the summer about the problem of loneliness in our culture;

About how we Americans are disconnected from one another;

Even though we have these incredible technological tools that connect us instantly

To one another all over the world;

But though we think this is some kind of living community;

It doesn't replace the joys and challenges of real people in real time;

And is actually contributing to the loneliness and isolation we feel.

This is not the only time in the history of the world when loneliness was a challenge

And Jesus' call to come, follow me, and is an invitation to the lonely in His day

A call to lonely people who are living lives disconnected from God and one another.

And finally, Jesus is calling us to bring this Christian community to the world;
To be a group of people who are welcoming so others may join God's community here;
That they, too, may come to know the love and grace and life that we're coming to know;
And then to spread that kind of love and grace and hopefulness and life
Into the nation and the world around us
That the nation and world look more like God's vision and not ours.

But just so you know, the following is not always easy, as today's Gospel describes;
And while Jesus is not calling us to actually hate our family members and life itself;
He is calling us to make our relationship with God our first priority.

And while Jesus is not calling us to die on a cross any time soon, I hope;
He is calling us to set aside our focus on ourselves and to think about ourselves less;
So that we can think of God and others more and give more of ourselves.

And while Jesus is not requiring everyone to give up all our possessions and live in poverty;
He is calling us to hold our possessions lightly so our possessions don't possess us;
And to be better stewards of all we have, by giving it over for God's use.

Jesus' call is an invitation to a life that's very different from the life most of us are leading;
And it's the greatest challenge we could ever take on, following Jesus;
But our following comes with a living, close relationship with God;
A community where we are loved and can love;
And a higher purpose for our life and for the life of the world.

Choose

The famous baseball player and wit, Yogi Berra,
In later life became better known for his misuse of the English language
And common phrases than as a baseball player or manager.

He one time said, "When you come to the fork in the road, take it!"

Well, you can't take both directions at a fork in the road;

You and I must choose one way or the other;

And only one way will lead to real life and community.

My hope and my desire for all of us in this new year, me included;

Is that today or tomorrow or over the coming months and year;

We will answer Jesus' call to come and follow me;

To choose so that we can be drawn into the very presence of God;

To choose so that we can be a community of love and grace and activity

To choose so that we may be empowered by God to welcome others

And to share our values and gifts and love with a world in need of connection and purpose.

I don't know how you and I will be changed by this decision to follow

Or how each of us will experience the power of the community of God

Will share in the gifts and life of this community;

Or how our community is called to share our values and gifts for the world

But I do now that the way to real life begins and continues

When we answer Jesus' call;

So listen with me and come, follow.

Amen.