

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 23, 2011
Reverend Julio Cruz-Natal, Pastor
Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

Who Are We Following

Every leader of every time and place has had followers. It makes sense. You can't be a leader if you don't have someone following you; otherwise you are not leading anyone, right? Every significant leader in every age has had followers, or students, or disciples. In the ancient Greece it was the great thinkers and philosophers of the time. People like Plato and Aristotle would have plenty of people, even to this age, who studied their thoughts and teachings. They had followers. Martin Luther himself, even if that wasn't his purpose, gathered a great number of followers. So many that they ended up forming a different denomination which we call today Lutherans. He had followers. In more modern times, those who took it upon themselves to change the way society works, also had followers. People like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi preached messages of peace and non-violence that also attracted many, maybe millions to follow what they taught. It does seem like every leader of history has had their group of followers.

Jesus was also a leader. Some would argue that he was the greatest leader that has ever existed. He has inspired millions, more like billions of people throughout the world and throughout history to follow him. To a great leader there can only be great followers. Nevertheless that does not seem to be the way in which Jesus gathered his first few followers. I mean, if you were to consult with one of those leadership gurus that we see on TV, they would probably not recommend you to do what Jesus did. Did he go to Jerusalem, the center of all things religious at the time? No. Did he look for the brightest young minds he could find? No. Did he consult with the authorities of the day? No. Just who would Jesus pick to entrust the entire responsibility for building the kingdom of God?

Jesus did not do any of that and therefore broke with the conventional ideas, not only of our time and place but of his context as well. He did something completely countercultural. Instead of going to Jerusalem to find the religious teachers of the time, he went to Capernaum to find some fishermen. Now, tell me if that makes any sense to you. If Jesus has come to preach about the "kingdom of heaven [that] has come near" why would he go to such a place to look for such people? "Galilee of the Gentiles" the gospel says, unbelievers, those outside the chosen people of God. And then fishermen; what would they know about faith, and religion, and converting others to God? Why would Jesus recruit fishermen for his mission? It's not like they know what needs to be done – or do they? Where is Jesus going with the rather inappropriate group of candidates?

The people Jesus seeks out to be his disciples are so incredibly ordinary. They have no education, no wealth, no social status, or even skills that would help them to gather other

followers. In fact, you would be hard pressed to find in them any particular experience or characteristics that would even remotely predict any kind of success. Jesus seems to be seeking out ordinary, everyday, even mundane people to be the bearers of his message of reconciliation and redemption. And here I am wondering why.

Now, that may prove to be a very difficult question to answer. The gospel does not say much that would lead us in any particular direction. Nevertheless, what the gospel does say may actually shed a little clue. Jesus said “follow me” and they immediately left all what they had and followed him. You see, the fact that these are ordinary people who don’t have much that ties them up makes them perfect candidates. They have nothing to lose; they have nothing that would impede them. They can simply drop whatever little things they had and go in a different direction.

Now let me ask you, is that a message of hope or a challenge for you? If we are saying that Jesus called people who didn’t have much to lose, does that make us good or bad candidates to be Jesus followers? As a preacher I must say that this is a risky road to take. People may actually feel that they have too much to risk to follow Jesus. Well, yes, I guess this is a message that has the potential to backfire, but here’s what I see that made me think we could reflect around this. The people who are willing to follow Jesus are those who are willing to let go of what holds them down. Maybe those fishermen did not have much, but they had something, didn’t they? In fact, isn’t the opposite also true? If you only have one or two things in your life, how difficult would it be for you to let go of it to do something else? Maybe those fishermen did not have much, but what they had was important. A job to earn their livelihood, a means to sustain their families, or actually a family that loved them. The gospel says that James and John left their father Zebedee to follow Jesus. What is holding you down?

You know, sometimes the most difficult things to let go of are not necessarily tangible things. It occurs to me that maybe this is a thing about priorities, about values, about judging what is important or necessary. Maybe this is a thing about who or what you are loyal to. What gives you direction, where is your focus. The thing about being a follower or a disciple is that you are being asked to let go of yourself to follow someone else and that can be very difficult and painful to do. You have to renounce your convictions to learn from someone else. You have to relinquish your ideals to believe in someone different. More than your possessions, you are risking your individuality, your ego, your pride.

Take for example what happened to those in the church of Corinth. They were good people. People who had converted from other ways of life to “those of The Way” as the Christians of the first century were called. And in doing so, they had to reshuffle their ideas and their convictions to follow those of someone else. And that’s not easy to do. And when that becomes difficult it’s when divisions arise among people.

Paul had heard about the people in Corinth, that they were calling themselves followers of Apollo, and others followers of Cephas, and even others followers of Paul himself. But Paul challenged them with a very easy question: Was anyone of those, including himself, crucified? Were you baptized in the name of any of those you follow? Keep this in mind.

These are people who called themselves members of that movement initiated by the teachings of Jesus. These are believers. These are members of the fold. But these were also people who had lost their focus of what or who they were followers of and therefore lost also their direction, their guidance, their north. When we call ourselves disciples we should also be wondering who or what we are disciples of. In essence Paul is asking of the people in Corinth, have you replaced Christ with some other idea or person? Whose crucifixion do you owe your life to? Whose baptism has granted you citizenship in the kingdom of heaven?

When Jesus calls us to be followers, we need to be in a constant watch and rediscovery of what is at the center of our attention. It's very easy to lose our focus from that that got us engaged in being disciples of Jesus the first time. And again the temptations are very subtle and our focus can often shift to very intangible things. Our pretensions to be supposedly faithful to a set of rules, or a philosophy of life, or even our own theology may make us followers of things or people completely different to Christ. In the end, whatever measuring stick we are using to gauge our faithfulness has to come back to the one who called us first: Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.