

Follow, follow...  
Epiphany 3B  
January 24, 2021

1960 musical "The Fantastiks" gave us a memorable, sentimental song, which is still a favourite at some karaoke bars. Perhaps you remember that song: "Try to remember the kind of September when grass was green and the grain was yellow...." You remember.

But do you remember how that song ends?

Try to remember and if you remember, then follow, follow, follow, follow, follow, follow, follow, follow. It's a song with a lot of follows.

Had I written that song, I would have stopped with one follow. But the writers evidently liked the word follow so they included a whole lot of them. Follow, follow, follow, follow.

Whenever I hear today's reading, I have the same reaction because the Bible is not shallow on follows.

"Follow me," Jesus says. "And immediately they left their nets and followed him." How could it be that Simon, Andrew, James and John, tough working-class men plying their trade as fishermen, just drop their nets and follow this wandering rabbi?

It's a story of faith, commitment, and following Christ. Those are big words. But often those words seem far away from the reality of the church as we know it.

The reality is that "mainline" churches, Lutherans included are becoming the sideline churches as they continue to decline in numbers and influence.

A few years ago people in various Christian denominations were asked how much their faith meant to them. As you might guess fundamentalists ranked highest, with more than 70% of their people saying their faith was very important to them. After them came the Mormons, further down, the Catholics, and on the bottom a cluster including the Lutherans.

Passionate commitment seems to come hard for many mainline Christians.

Talking to people about their faith, and about their unease over the big words like commitment and following, I often sense a real pathos. I've heard many talk about

how empty their experience of the church had been growing up, how little real experience of Christian love they had ever found, and yet how they still hunger to be connected to a larger world of meaning.

My guess is many of us share that. We seek a living God, but trusting in an unseen Mystery can be hard. We are afraid to open ourselves too much, for fear either that we will find there really is nothing to all this, or that there is more than we ever imagined.

What strikes us in today's reading is the sheer impulsiveness of it all. Jesus walks up and says "Follow." It's a call from beyond them. Something intrusive, a challenge, an invitation interrupts their lives.

And the biggest shock is that they go along with all this. That's definitely not like us. We have responsibilities. We wouldn't have gotten where we are without being careful and minimizing the risks. But something just happens here. Something from beyond them grasps them.

Malcolm Gladwell writes in his book *Blink*, about how many of the important decisions we make come in an instant—who you fall in love with, where you want to live, what kind of work you want to do. Things have been stirring inside you, but then all of a sudden something clicks.

There is no talk in today's story of a faith that comes in a neat package. These fishermen aren't asked to believe anything at first—no doctrines, no arguments. Jesus doesn't put in front of them a set of rules or requirements for admission. He just says, "Come and follow." The only way they are going to know what Jesus is about is by going along with him and doing what he does. All that faith in Jesus takes is a willingness to trust a hunch, to decide to try it for ourselves.

Science has convinced us that anything can be understood given enough time. What about joy, or love, or delight, or grief, or despair, or the longings of our souls, or the glimpses we've had of a peace we have no name for—we never fully understand them.

In the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, a high society woman comes to a spiritual leader asking him to help her to recover her lost faith. "How can I believe in God again?" she asks, "You must learn to love, he answers. Try to love your neighbors, love them actively and unceasingly. And as you learn to love them more and more, you will be more and more convinced of God and the immortality of your soul."

Not, “First you must have faith,” but rather, “Love, and then faith will come.” Turn loose of yourself, learn what it means to live like Christ—open yourself to God and to those around you, and you will find that God is real.

Come and live the way human beings were meant to live. Let go of your preoccupations. Link your life to people who need you—and you will begin to find yourself discovering a Purpose and Love you could never have thought your way into.

Over and over the great teachers of our faith have said that we can never know God with our minds. We can know *about* God, but real knowing requires giving ourselves.

And that means that what we most need is to enter into the practices of Christian faith, the practices of real community, to take time to pray, to be quiet enough to allow our noisy lives to settle down until, in the silence we can speak what our soul needs to say, and know ourselves accepted and embraced.

Maybe only half-crazy people decide to go out and stake their lives on an unexpected call, or an impulse. But every now and then it happens.

In 1990 Wendy Kopp arrived to Princeton University to recruit for her new program called “Teach for America.” It aimed to recruit university graduates to teach for two years in some of the poorest schools in the US. There had been a few posters around the campus about this unpromising job opportunity, and Ms. Kopp expected a handful to show up. Over three hundred did.

Ms. Kopp explained to these ambitious young people that this really wasn’t much of a job. You’ll be working in some of the worst schools in the country, she said. It could be dangerous at times. The hours will be long and the pay will be barely enough to live on. It’ll probably be the hardest thing you’ll ever do. If you want, I can add your name on the list. Thanks for listening. Have a great day.”

And then, these bright, privileged students, with their futures laid out in front of them, started jamming the aisles to put their names on the list—on an impulse. It seems they heard a call.

“Come and follow me,” Jesus says.

At some level you are watching this service today because God has been calling you.

“Come and follow me,”.

That doesn't mean you have to drop your nets and leave home. It meant that for those four fishermen. But if this story is about being called into the great flow of God's life in the world and letting ourselves be caught up in it, then that will mean a different story for each of us.

“Come and follow me,” Jesus says. You can follow me in Toronto and New York, in Washington DC. Listen for what I'm asking of you. Listen in the stirring of a sleepless night, in the nagging issues at work that won't go away, in the yearning in your own heart for a life that matters.

“Come and follow me,”.

It may mean doing all the same things in your life, only doing them so that God's love shines through how you do them. It may mean raising children or teaching math or caring for patients. It may mean writing cheques, or serving meals, or working in Ottawa on behalf of the poor. It may even mean doing less every day, instead of more, so that you can hear God's voice more clearly.

The possibilities are endless if you just listen.  
God is calling.

“Follow me,” Jesus said. “And immediately they left their nets and followed him.”