

“Following”

First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Proverbs 3:5-10

New Testament Lesson: Luke 5:1-11

When people on Facebook see a posting they want to know more about, they often comment on it with one, simple word: “Following.” Then, when someone who knows more about it posts information, they get notified as a “follower” of the original post. You know, things like, “Where are all the good taco Tuesday places in Independence?” That one got 54-comments-and-counting within two hours. Or here’s another one: “Where is the best place to get a tattoo in town?” Seventy comments and counting.

From tacos to tattoos to whatever you’re interested in, it’s all available on Facebook for those who follow it. Most everybody is following something or somebody on social media, TV or radio news, weekly columns or entertainment shows. And then there are those who aren’t as much following as being followed – on Twitter, Instagram and the like. Having a lot of followers means you’re popular, influential, often rich. Why do we follow famous people?

Psychologist Sheila Kohler says, “Part of our curiosity is a way of learning what makes the great great in our own search for knowledge, fame and fortune. But,” says Kohler, “we can also read the great writers or study the great painters and musicians to learn their tricks of the trade, in an effort to emulate, and in some rare cases to surpass what came before us.”¹

So the question is, do we follow people and ideas in a quest for fame and fortune, or as a way of emulating-displaying-their good qualities, and just maybe even sharing them with others, spreading goodness throughout the world.

In Our New Testament lesson today, Jesus has attracted a great many followers. As he approaches the lake of Gennesaret, also known as the lake of Galilee, Luke tells us that “the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God ..., (so he) got into one of the (nearby) boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.”

Kohler, Sheila. Why Are We Fascinated By Celebrities? - What makes us follow the lives of the famous with fascination? www.psychologytoday.com, posted Aug 23, 2014.

Unlike our secret desire to be rich like the celebrities we follow, the people around Jesus that day didn't necessarily want to be like him. They merely wanted to hear what he had to say.

After all, Jesus was not rich or famous by the standards of his day. He didn't dress in the finest clothes, live in the biggest house, eat the fanciest food, or wield the most power and influence – at least not the way we typically think of power and influence.

Jesus embodied a different type of power and influence, the power of a humble servant and the influence of a pure and faithful soul. In our world, humble servants get overlooked and the pure of heart too often get taken advantage of.

So Jesus decided to do something to get people's attention and focus them on a greater source of power and abundance. He says to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answers, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

You see, Simon Peter had been working through the night and he and his fishing partners were done, nets cleaned and folded, ready to be put away.

How many of us, when we are done, are eager to go out again, even if it is in service of the Lord? It takes something to put in that extra effort.

Why do you do it? Why do you get out of bed early on Sunday and come to church? Why do you come out after work for a committee meeting or our mid-week LOGOS ministry, or choir rehearsals? Why do you spend Saturday volunteering at church or in the community, helping a neighbor, tending to household chores? There has to be some inspiration and encouragement for us to give of ourselves for no immediate, outward reward.

For Simon and his fishing buddies, that inspiration and encouragement came from Jesus. They were inspired by the words he said and encouraged by his confidence in that next big catch. So they put out into deeper water and let down their nets, just like Jesus said.

"When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink."

Even though Simon Peter was reluctant to put in the extra effort – saying, "Master, we have worked all night long ..." – the Lord still honored his willingness to get out there and try. He worked a miracle in Peter's life.

How many of us here feel that God has worked miracles in your life? Raise your hand and keep it up. If you can think of at least one time that the Lord has worked a miracle in your life, raise your hand and look around at the folks in this sanctuary who have also gained the same inspiration and encouragement from the Lord.

Wouldn't you like to know what that miracle was for the person raising a hand near you? Why not? Pick someone in this sanctuary who raised his or her hand and ask them. Not now, but maybe after worship or sometime this week. Ask what the miracle was, and listen about how God works miracles even today.

For Simon Peter and his friends it was an impossible catch of fish, showing them that with God, nothing is impossible. And this shocked them; that God would work a miracle in their lives.

Luke tells us that Simon Peter "fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon."

Through the miracle in their lives that day, Jesus captured the attention of everyone who saw it or heard about it, including us! He drew them and us into closer relationship with one another. They shared a common experience, something that would change their lives forever, and so do we.

Each of us has had such an experience in life, a time when God worked a miracle in our lives, in your life. But the real power and blessing and abundance of that miracle experience is sharing it with others. It's the miracle of faith spreading from one person to another, faith bringing people to Jesus in common purpose.

Though Peter and his friends were overwhelmed by the miracle they witnessed, Jesus pointed them to the real purpose of that miraculous catch, saying, "Do not be afraid or overwhelmed; from now on you will be catching people," as they see God working in and through your life.

God wants to bless your life through the miracles you have experienced, no doubt. But even more so, God wants to bless the lives of others through you. Don't keep your miracle story to yourself. Find someone this week to share it with. Or if talking about yourself isn't your thing, share a miracle from someone else, from that person you saw with a raised hand.

Take a moment after worship or sometime this week to ask about someone else's miracle experience and if you can share that story with others. The miracle of the greatest catch was not about fishing. It was about sharing the story with others so that they, too, would turn to the Lord.

Simon Peter and James and John set aside everything to follow Jesus because Jesus gave them new purpose in life, to be more like Jesus, to change the world in the way and manner of Jesus – not by becoming more wealthy and powerful, but by becoming more open and giving and faithful.

There is no telling what miracles await you in your faithful following of Jesus. Only that they do, that God is out ahead of you – at your next gathering of friends at school or at work or church, -out ahead of you at that neighborhood event on your calendar, and perhaps, even in your next Facebook post. What a miracle it would be to have someone there to share the faith with, to bond over the miracle of Jesus Christ.

God meets us where we are and empowers us to follow Jesus wherever he leads, assuring each of us that we, too, can be – and are – catching people, attracting people, as followers of Christ. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Steadfast and loving God, so often we come before you bringing only our concerns. We get so weighed down with our worries that we forget to sing your praises.

So now we lay our grief, pain and worries aside for a short while, with the assurance that they're already safe with you.

Help us remember that it's important to take time to sing praise for your very presence in our lives, to share news of the divine miracles we've experienced with others, to give you thanks with our whole hearts!

We are thankful for the dawn of each new day and the splendor of your creation ... for friends who share our times of laughter and tears... for the diversity of thought and culture and gifts among all your children ... for the snowfall of winter and for the first flowers of spring ...for the joys we share with others ...and for the amazing gift of salvation through your Son, Jesus Christ.

We pray all this in the powerful, miraculous name of Jesus, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**