

Turn and Follow

Mark 1:14-20
January 21, 2024

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

Theologian Frederick Buechner, writing in his book “The Alphabet of Grace,” tells of the following exchange between his grandmother and him.

“The way I understood it,” she said, “you were supposed to devote these talks to religious matters. Incarnation and Grace and Salvation were some of the noble words you used.”

Buechner responded, saying, “I say that feet are very religious too.”

She says that’s what you think.

“I say that if you want to know who you are, if you are more than academically interested in that particular mystery, you could do a lot worse than look to your feet for an answer ... when you wake up in the morning, ... if you want to know who you are, watch your feet. Because where your feet take you, that is who you are.”¹

In today’s New Testament lesson, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, along with James and his brother John, woke up as fishermen. That’s where their feet took them on that particular day some 2,000 years ago.

That’s who they are – they are fishermen, casting nets into the lake, mending their nets on the shoreline. That’s who they are and that’s who they’ve always been, and barring some major life event that’s who they will be throughout their days – fishermen, just like their fathers before them and brothers beside them.

Being a fisherman in 1st Century Palestine “was highly profitable, but it was strenuous work and needed major organization. ... Two or three boats would work together ... (to) chase fish into the net ... seven or eight times during the night, and by morning (they) could bring in a half ton of fish.

During the day, the men were busy sorting the fish, washing and repairing their nets, hanging them out to dry, and folding them for the next day’s catch.”²

As fishermen, Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John were free to set their own schedules, just like many of us. Many of us are free to set our own schedule or at least choose our

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (Harper & Row, 1985), 24-25.

² James Campbell, D Min, *Biblical Fishing 101 Reeling in the First Fishers of Faith*, <https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/prayer/arts-and-faith/culinary-arts/biblical-fishing-101-reeling-in-the-first-fishers-of-faith/>

own careers. And just as Jesus saw these four guys going about their business, Jesus looks upon us and sees what we're up to each day; he sees where our feet take us.

When Jesus saw those earliest disciples going about their daily tasks, he saw thoughtful, dedicated men and, no doubt, the women who supported their efforts. And Jesus said to himself, I can use a group of people like that! These are just the type of people God sent me to find. I've finally found those who – with my help – will become the foundation of the church and its continuing mission.

Where did your feet take you this morning? To church, right?!? How great is that. What a good start to the week. Church is where we are spiritually fed and nurtured to go forth on behalf of Christ, to do the work of God – caring for those less fortunate; looking for and guiding those who are lost in a world of good and bad choices; giving of our time, talents and treasures in support of God's work; comforting the afflicted; and helping to create a pathway to freedom for those held captive by circumstances beyond their control.

Hey, wait a minute. How much of that godly work is on your to-do list this week? That's a good question, isn't? It's so easy to get caught up in doing stuff that we think is important, stuff we think we have to do at all costs. But what about the stuff we're called to do, as followers of the Lord.

As Mark tells us, "Jesus came to Galilee (to proclaim) the good news of God, (saying), 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.'"

Now, truth be told, Jesus could have fulfilled the plan and purpose of God right then and there all by himself. But instead, he comes looking for us. He comes to tell us to repent, which literally means to "turn," turn from what you're looking at, turn from where you're headed, says Jesus, and see things my way, follow where I lead you. Come with me, he says, and I will usher you into the kingdom of God. And believe me, says Jesus, it's not as far off as you might think. In fact, "the kingdom of God has come near," to you.

In other words, every day that we draw near to Jesus, we draw nearer and nearer to the kingdom of God, the reign of God – over and above the reign of earthly men and women, over and above the kingdom of people, places and things.

Look, we know what the kingdom of people, places and things looks like – in our families, in our communities, in our country, and in our world. We know that the kingdom of people, places and things blocks our vision of the kingdom of God, it turns our attention away from God's plan and purpose.

And yet everyday, we do the same things while hoping and praying for different results. It just doesn't work that way, does it? We have to repent, we have to turn away from how we see things and look at how God sees things. We have to turn away from following our own

lead and instead follow the Lord, by quieting the noise all around us and listening for his voice, his guidance, his instruction.

When you woke up this morning, what did Jesus say to you? Go to church, right; maybe? Why? What does Jesus expect you to get out of being here today?

I'm betting it is more than deciding whether Pastor Dave had a good sermon or not. I'm betting it is more than deciding whether we had enough familiar hymns to sing. I'm betting what Jesus expects of us is more than seeing who's here and who's not.

I'm betting Jesus wants to speak a word to you and me – this day, this morning – a word that will redirect your life to be more aligned with God's work, God's plan and purpose for you, today, this week, and every day and week to come.

As you contemplate that possibility and what it means to have Jesus in your life – and how you might live into any truth and hope and blessing it brings – I'll leave you with the following reflection, from a book titled "Wisdom of the Sadhu."³

Some moral teachers and many religious leaders say, "Do good works and you will become good people." It is absurd to suggest that a bitter tree will become sweet by constantly bringing forth fruit doing what it's always done. A bitter tree can only become sweet by being grafted onto a sweet tree.

The life and qualities of the sweet tree can then flow with its sap into the bitter tree, driving out all its inherent bitterness. In this way, the tree becomes a new creation, capable of bearing sweet fruit.

We may well have the longing to do what is right," says the Sadhu, "but everything we do is corrupted, tainted by our own selfishness and sin.

Only if we recognize our sinfulness, as well as our inability to do what is right, and turn to the Master who grafts us onto himself, do we become new creations. Only then are we capable of doing good works. So, I say, "First become good, and then you can perform good deeds."

Let us all, then, ask the Lord to speak a good word to us each day that we might graft ourselves, attach ourselves to him and his purpose – regardless of our own idea of what's important, or what's pleasurable. And then, hearing the Lord's good word for us, let us go forth with the Lord and his word grafted into our hearts, following the Lord's guidance, and seeking the Lord's blessing. Amen.

³ Sundar Singh, *Wisdom of the Sadhu* (Plough, 2014), 68-69.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of Wonder, you have set us upon this wonderful journey called life – life with you and life with those we love and care about.

You have bestowed upon us something of your own powers, so that we can explore the world, and even explore the universe and worlds in distant places.

You have given us understanding and imagination through which we can develop and mature. You have given us humor so that we can find joy in the world around us.

Having given us all of that, you give us also a real chance to make something of ourselves and the human condition.

We praise you, for we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

We pray for those whose current journey is particularly difficult and uncertain. Lord, we cannot see the ending of the adventure of life that we're on, but we know that it is your love upholding us step by step.

We all stumble from time to time and sometimes fail, but then you graciously help us rise again, just as you will when our earthly adventure is finally ended, when we fall one last time. Then, too, you will again take our hand and give us just one more surprise: the news that our joyful adventure has only just begun!

For this and all the gifts and blessings of life, we thank you, O Lord, and with thanksgiving, we pray the prayer that you gave to us, as we pray together, saying:

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.

