Homily, Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 24, 2021

S. Stephen’s, Providence

And Jesus said to them, “Follow me.”

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I encounter the option to “Follow” a great deal these days:

there are channels on YouTube that I can subscribe to or follow –

there are friends and celebrities alike that I can follow on Instagram –

pages on Facebook that I can like or follow –

such as S. Stephen’s in Providence!

If you haven’t already, you should like or follow our page

so that videos like this pop up in your feed,

and you’ll receive notifications when we are live.

So yes, the invitation to “follow” is everywhere around us –

and the number of “followers” one has on Twitter or other social media platforms

becomes a way of measuring success or influence.

This morning we’ve just heard the call of the disciples in Mark’s Gospel,

and Jesus’s invitation to them, “Follow me.”

First Simon and Andrew, and then another set of brothers, James and John.

I always wonder if they had seen Jesus before,

or encountered him somewhere previously.

Maybe they knew some of his extended family who lived nearby.

Maybe they’d heard his preaching of the Gospel and the coming kingdom of God,

or they’d heard someone else describe it.

Not many of us can imagine dropping everything we’re doing – work, even family –

to follow a complete stranger.

But maybe – just maybe there was something about Jesus’s invitation –

a voice cutting through the din and monotony of the day’s work –

a voice which, though you’d never heard it before,

seemed to know you deeply … intimately …

and spoke directly to your heart.

Perhaps God had already planted some sort of seed in the hearts of these fishermen,

long before this moment,

their life’s work somehow preparing them for what was about to happen.

However it happened, and whatever was running through their minds,

they said yes, and their world would never be the same.

Of course, there was more to Jesus’ invitation than simply, “Follow me.”

“Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.”

What did this strange phrase mean, “fishers of men?”

As they left their nets and followed Jesus,

he began to tell them of the Kingdom of God,

and the new reign of God’s kingdom that Jesus was working to bring about.

They would have heard a message of repentance and forgiveness,

of God’s endless mercies,

and about a way of living marked by faith, hope, and love.

And Jesus was asking them to join with him as he set out to bring about this kingdom:

them – simple fishermen.

No background checks, no aptitude test, no W4 to fill out –

just come and follow me.

Now we are told that John the Baptist has already been arrested,

having angered Herod and challenged his authority.

Jesus offers the disciples no guarantees of safety or security,

no promises of wealth or prestige.

Nevertheless they follow, and will end up spending the next three years

learning from Jesus,

and preaching the Good News of God’s reign,

even casting out demons and curing the sick and the lame.

Of course,

you and I are likewise called to follow Jesus.

When we hear the call of the disciples,

we likewise hear Jesus’s voice beckoning to us, “Follow me.”

This invitation will sound different to each of us,

and the way it manifests itself in our lives will also take on different forms.

Few of us will ever feel the need to drop everything we’re doing,

and leave behind the security of income and family,

the way in which these first disciples did.

But it is clear from our Scripture readings today that there is something commendable

in responding to God’s invitation with a sense of urgency.

Jonah proclaims a message of doom and destruction to the people of Nineveh,

and they respond by immediately repenting and fasting,

thereby avoiding disaster.

How much more compelling, then,

is the message which the disciples were given to proclaim?

No threats of destruction – but a message of hope:

a message that brims with possibilities at every turn.

The message to Repent and believe the Good News of God’s Kingdom

says that we are not bound by or defined by our worst impulses or saddest moments.

It means that God’s grace is more powerful than any other force we can imagine,

and so God’s ability to transform and heal,

his prerogative to re-birth and build up

will always have the last word.

With a message like that, why would anyone sit on the fence pondering their response

to Jesus’s invitation to “Follow me?”

When we walk with Jesus,

we discover that the love of God for the world and for each person within it

changes the way we see and experience the world and each other.

We learn how beloved we are,

and that God desires us to experience light, love, and life –

and that life triumphs even over death.

When we accept Jesus’ invitation to follow him,

we embark on a journey that will occupy the rest of our lives,

and will challenge us to join with Jesus in bringing about the kingdom of God

here and now.

When Jesus invites those first disciples to follow him,

he also implies that their lives will be greatly changed,

and that they will become something they were not before.

That potential exists for all of us, individually and collectively.

If as a parish, S. Stephen’s renewed its commitment to follow Jesus,

I wonder what new things and what transformations might await us:

what is Jesus waiting to invite us into,

and where will we hear his voice saying, “Follow me?”

Where might it lead us?

Jesus’ first disciples were called from their home region of Galilee,

and this is where Jesus began his ministry – this unremarkable backwater

and out of the way region.

Three years later, when their world was shattered by Jesus’s arrest and crucifixion,

they returned to security and familiarity of Galilee.

It was there they encountered the Risen Christ,

and then understood that their mission was not just to Israel,

but to the world,

and that their acceptance of Jesus’ invitation to follow him

would lead them to the farthest reaches of the known world.

Simple fisher folk, with no other qualifications aside from hearts on fire,

burning with the love of God,

managed to turn the known world upside down.

Though lacking an official Twitter account,

Christianity currently has 2.4 billion followers around the globe,

and if we factor in the communion of saints –

our fellow Christians who have already completed their journey upon earth,

and now rest in the nearer presence of God,

the number becomes untellable –

that multitude which no one can number, as St. John writes,

those who had followed the Lamb, now seated upon the throne.

We too will join that throng one day –

until then, we continue to answer his call to “Follow me,”

trusting that untold surprises may yet wait for us,

if we will only look for them,

and be ready to hear the call anew. “Follow me.”

Amen.