

“Come, Follow Me: Following”
Mark 1:16-20

Thinking of our world, I know that there are wonderful and tough things at the same time. Life is both difficult and beautiful. Much of our suffering is caused by ourselves or others. I was struck recently by some facts about the lifelong damaging impact of negative childhood experiences. About three decades ago, a couple of doctors began making the connection between childhood trauma or emotional distress and the many illnesses people face as adults. Their research led them to major findings. Dr. Vincent Felitti and CDC epidemiologist Robert Anda, published the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACEs.) It revealed a troubling phenomenon: the more traumatic experiences their survey respondents had as children (such as physical and emotional abuse and neglect), the more likely they were to develop health problems later in life (cancer, heart disease, and high blood pressure) and the prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse, risky behaviors, and poor diet. The study showed the heavy price children pay for growing up in unsafe homes, schools, and communities. The numbers are staggering in terms of the percentage of people who have had Adverse Childhood Experiences. For example, one in ten of the respondents answered yes to the question “Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often swear at you, insult you, or put you down?” Here is a video about the impact of ACEs:

https://vimeo.com/139998006?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=20949959.

According to Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk, “Research from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) found that one in five Americans has been sexually molested as a child; one in four has been beaten by a parent; one in four of us grew up with alcoholic relatives; and one out of eight has witnessed their mother being beaten or hit. The CDC estimates that overall costs for childhood and adolescent trauma exceed those of cancer or heart disease, and that eradicating child abuse in America would reduce the overall rate of depression by more than half, alcoholism by two-thirds, and suicide, IV drug use, and domestic violence by three-quarters.”

Some may try to dismiss these statistics thinking that they only happen out there and not in our own community, but the research shows that these experiences are not limited to one group or another.

What I have been pondering is how God looks at such challenges and helps us to find ways to bring healing to the world. One of the greatest gifts that we have is following the way of Jesus to find our way out of the collective brokenness which we inflict on ourselves and on others. God knows that numbers, facts, laws, and rules are not adequate enough to truly heal and transform us. We have to be loved into a new way of being.

This is what the call to discipleship is all about. Following Jesus is not the same thing as believing in him. It is not about memorizing or obeying his words out of sheer will power. The invitation is for a journey with him and his followers so that we may find our way through into a life of grace, service, and love. We will listen to the call of four of Jesus’ original disciples and how they found their way on this journey of learning and

transformation. Let's listen to Mark 1:16-20 (<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/the-calling>)

The invitation to follow Jesus was not a job offer, but a way of life. It is not about a certain profession or what we do on the weekend. It is about learning to live by the values of the kingdom of God, not just mentally but through the friendship, love, and companionship of Jesus and his body.

The first disciples were called by Jesus and responded by walking with him for three years and learning from his way of life and of being. We don't know if they knew Jesus before, but most likely his reputation was known to them. They would have heard the teaching of John the Baptist who prepared the way and when the time was ripe, they said yes themselves. The vision of Jesus is of a world where Adverse Childhood Experiences don't exist or are healed, and compassion is the norm.

The Jewish people of Jesus' day had developed a way of knowing God. Their elementary school experience involved memorizing the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy! Middle school involved memorizing much of the rest of what we know as the Old Testament. Then, the best and brightest would apply to learn from a rabbi. If the rabbi believed the student could live and share his life, that is, take on his yoke, then the rabbi would invite the student to follow and learn from him. The idea was that the disciple would want to be like the rabbi and not just learn biblical teachings from them. A student not yoked to a rabbi would learn the family business. This is especially interesting because it meant that Jesus selected people who would have been overlooked by other teachers. Jesus selected people who knew all too well the painful realities of the world. They were on the bottom of society in terms of economic status. They were subject to the ruthless taxation system of the Roman Empire. Fishing was also a tough business. It depended on many unpredictable factors. The four who are mentioned in our story today, Simon, Andrew, James, and John, were ordinary people just like us. They knew the goodness of God's creation, but also its brokenness. The invitation of Jesus captured their imagination that they were able to let go of what they knew in order to follow a new way of life. It is important to remember that on the day they said yes to Jesus, they didn't fully know what they were getting into. They also didn't fully get what the good news of Jesus was all about. They needed to be discipled. They needed each other and needed to walk with Jesus daily to let his love shape them. Even toward the end of Jesus' life, Simon didn't fully get discipleship. He denied Jesus three times. After the resurrection, Peter also struggled with accepting the inspiration to extend the good news of Jesus to outsiders, the Gentiles.

Today we are invited to respond anew or for the first time to the call of Jesus to follow him and to live as disciples. What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? The Greek word *mathetes* is the word that Scripture uses for "disciple," and it means "learner-follower." A disciple learns to follow and learns by following; Jesus' disciples learn to follow Jesus and learn by following Jesus.

Since I am asking you to reflect on your discipleship, I will share a part of mine. Growing up in a culture that did not value girls the same way it valued boys, I struggled for many years with a sense of inadequacy and of shame. Being told at an early age, over and over again, that I needed to worry so much about what people thought of me, especially as a girl, made me feel scared to be myself, to make mistakes, or to have my own dreams. I have struggled with needing approval from others and with really accepting my shadow parts, faults and shortcomings. But through my study of scripture and learning that Jesus came to liberate us from all that holds us back and from the powers of oppression, I began to let go of fear and to trust my inner guidance. Then through friends who showed me the ways of contemplative and deep prayer, God finally broke through to me. The grace of God was not something that I knew in my head, but something that I experienced deep within my soul. I remember the first time, during silent prayer, when I felt this deep sense of love for God and for life. I found myself saying to God, "I love you" and I really meant and felt it deep within my soul. Major blockages to love were removed from my life. This has been an ongoing process and God is not done with healing me yet. But now, I have a deep and abiding sense of peace in my heart in the midst of the challenges of life. The good news of the love of God in Jesus is something that saves my life each and every day. It does not take me out of the struggles of life, it instead helps me know that nothing can separate me from the love of God. I am so grateful and indeed feel so blessed. This is the good news I feel compelled to share with others who are struggling. This is the good news several people have shared with me in their own lives, and which changed my life.

The invitation is for all of us today to receive or renew our call to follow Jesus and to allow him to make us like him. If you feel a nudge in your heart to heal our world and to see that Adverse Childhood Experiences are healed and eventually prevented, Jesus is inviting you to let him be your guide by loving you into a new way of life. He is ready for you to live the dream of love.

We will meditate on a song that will help us pay attention to our own call to follow:
"The Summons."