“Follow Me and I’ll Make You”

With every new year comes the impulse for self-improvement. I keep thinking that I’ll “grow out” of this ever-present annual desire to be *better*. But each year, as the calendar turns over, it’s as if we step into a river with a strong current, and we’re pulled along with the societal push to “improve ourselves.”

There are bookshelves filled with self-help guides, curated journals to help us achieve our goals, apps to make us healthier, to change our brain chemistry, to make us calmer, and happier, thinner, and better with our money.

It’s a powerful thing this annual message that says: “This is *finally* your chance to be *good*.” A new year and a new *you*.

Into that current of self-improvement steps Jesus. Jesus – who seems to challenge the idea that we have to better than we currently are to join him on this journey. Jesus finds us as we are, and says, “Yeah, I can work with this.”

In the Gospel, Jesus walks up to Peter, Andrew, James and John, in an ordinary moment in their lives – while they’re at work fishing, and says, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” “Follow me,” He says, “And I will make you what I need you to be.”

Jesus doesn’t demand these men become something entirely different and new to follow him. He doesn’t ask that they first do some “self-improvement.”

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1 This sermon was heavily inspired by two commentaries written by two different women: Audrey West (WorkingPreacher website) and Debie Thomas (Journey with Jesus website). Both are cited below when quotes are drawn from their work. I commend their commentaries to you for further reading.
As one preacher put it, “Jesus doesn’t seem bothered by their grimy fingernails, their wet and dirty clothing, not even by their low social status or lack of political power. [He] doesn’t demand that they shower up before joining his mission, nor does he ask questions about their education, their abilities, nor their availability for an extended time away from home.”

He finds them where they are – fishing – and uses their current occupation to explain what’s to come:
“follow me, and I’ll make you fish for people.”
Jesus’ call to them is “familiar and close-to-home.”
And I imagine these fishermen-turned-disciples may have understood that call not as a directive to change who they were, but to become more fully and freely themselves.

So I think of it for us gathered in these pews:
That Jesus comes to us wherever we are and whatever we’re doing, asking us to follow him.
We don’t have to first improve ourselves,
Or first find a better job,
Or first check our calendars,
Or first grow up.
Or do anything first, really.

“All that’s asked is simply that we follow:
as we are, from where we are, being who we are.”

I hear Jesus’ invitation to our whole church this morning.
On this Annual Meeting Sunday,
As we reflect on what’s past,
And look with anticipation towards what’s to come.
And I imagine Jesus saying to us now – as a congregation –
Follow me, St. Paul’s…
As you are.
From where you are.
Being who you are,
And I’ll make you into the church I need you to be.

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4 Ibid.
5 West, Audrey.
Because, you know, churches often fall prey to the same pressures of self-improvement that the wider society feels. It’s tempting to believe that we need to do the latest unique and relevant “thing” as a church. That we need more young families, Or more programs for older folks, Or a branding statement, Or a better website, Or more diversity, Or more staff, Or less staff, Or...you get the idea.

But again, we hear the invitation of Jesus in the Gospel today, saying: “I’ll come to the ordinary moments of your life – To your committee meetings, Your choir rehearsals, Your youth group. I’ll come to your feeding ministry, Your budget meeting, And your Church School classroom, And I will make you the followers that I need you to be.”

Now this message of “be who you are” probably feels good. But I have to share what one writer cautioned us with. She wrote:
Now “I don't mean to suggest that discipleship won't require sacrifice, or change, or risk [for us or for our church]. It will. But I’m convinced that God is gentler with us than we are with ourselves. When Jesus promises to “make us,” it’s a commitment to nurture us, not a threat to sever us from all we love. It's a promise rooted in gentleness and respect. It's a promise that when we dare to let go [of our perfectionistic ideals,] the things we relinquish might be returned to us anew, enlivened in ways we couldn't have imagined.”

“We’re not supposed to heed his call “in general,” as if Christianity comes in a number of pre-packaged, cookie-cutter shapes we have to pummel ourselves into. If we’re going to follow [Jesus] at all, we’ll have to do it in the unique particulars of the lives, communities, cultures, families, and vocations we find ourselves in. We’ll have to trust that God prizes our intellects, our memories, our backgrounds, our educations, our skills.”
We have to trust that God will use the offerings of the daily stuff of our lives. “I will make you,” he tells the fishermen.
I will take cultivate, deepen, magnify, purify, protect, and perfect the people God created you to be.”

There was no bright star for those fishermen to follow long ago. No earthquake to signal the epic change of direction their lives were about to take. Just a voice from a fellow man coming into their lives at an ordinary moment, while they were at their job that had seemingly nothing to do with “ministry.”

So I imagine Jesus’ – our fellow man and yet God – coming up to us now, casually – while we’re going about our business in this Ordinary Time, saying, “Follow me, St. Paul’s.”

Follow me, and I’ll make you into doers of justice. Follow me, those who are tired and discouraged about your ministry, and I’ll refresh you. Follow me, those who are eager to serve and don’t know how, and I’ll show you the way. Follow me, you who’ve lost faith, and I’ll lead you to God again.

Follow me, he says to this whole complicated and beautiful community,

As you are,

From where you are,

Being who you are,

And I’ll make you.

I’ll make you what I need you to be.

I’ll use what you can give.

Follow me and I’ll make you into the people God created you to be.

Follow me.

Amen.

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6 Ibid.

7 General idea of these lines taken David Toole in Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1 Advent Through Transfiguration, pg. 288.