

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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John 2:43-51

*The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow Me."
(John 2:43 N.R.S.V.)*

Rules for the Road

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life and your life.

In our passage from John, Jesus calls people to be his disciples, to follow him on the way. In doing so he gives them some rules for the road. These rules for the road still apply to us today.

Let me pause for a moment and say that not knowing the rules of the road can get you in deep trouble. A friend was telling me that not too long ago he saw a couple of tourists beside a country road. There were a couple of cute little bear cubs beside the road and these ignorant tourists were chasing the cubs.

Anyone who was raised in the back country of West Virginia knows what a stupid and dangerous thing that was. We know that the mother bear is usually not far from her cubs. We also know that mother bears have a nasty tendency to kill anything or anybody they find messing with their babies. We also know that you can't get away from an angry black bear by climbing a tree. Not only can a bear run much faster than a human, they can also climb trees much faster than we can.

Fortunately my friend stopped and persuaded the tourists to get back in their car before momma bear showed up. I was feeling all superior to those stupid tourists until I remembered a television show that I watched awhile back. As the boat made its way up an African river, they came upon a herd of hippos in the middle of the river. One of them was lifting his head out of the water and doing that yawning thing.

The guide explained that what I thought was a yawn was actually a threat gesture, much like the growling of a dog. He pointed out that because hippos are short, fat, and rather comical looking, we tend to underestimate their danger. A big bull hippo can weigh up to 8,000 lbs. That is four times as much as one of those big Budweiser horses. The guide said that hippos are highly territorial, very aggressive, and incredibly fast both in the water and on land. He added that most outsiders thought the danger in that area came from the crocodiles. Actually, he said, the biggest danger to boaters was the hippos. Hundreds of people are killed or injured each year by hippos.

I remember all of the times I have been to zoos and stood there calmly right up against the fence, looking at the sleepy old hippo as he yawned and yawned. Yes, there was a fence between me and the hippo. But there is no way that I would have been right up against that fence if the animal on the other side had been a snarling wolf or tiger.

Knowing the rules of the road is very important. What you don't know can hurt you.

Let's look back at our passage for today and examine the rules for the road that Jesus gives to his disciples.

The first thing we note is that Jesus never said to his disciples that they were to believe in a certain way, or that they were to feel a certain way, instead he said, follow me.

The great theologian Frederick Buechner pointed out that many people think that Christians are people who believe certain things, for example, that Jesus is the son of God. We do believe that, but that is not primarily what makes us Christians.

Other people think that Christians are those who do certain things. For example, Christians go to church, pray, and read the Bible. We do those things he said, but that is not primarily what makes us Christians.

Still others think that Christians are simply nice people. Actually Christians, says Buechner, are not any nicer than most other people. Christians aren't necessarily any nicer than anybody else, just forgiven and better informed.

Buechner continues, Christians are people who follow Jesus on the way. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except by me."

Christians are not people who follow certain rules, we are people who follow a person. We follow Jesus Christ. We are on the way with Christ. We may not be very far along that way, but what gives us our identities is, that we are people who are following Christ.

The first rule of the road for Christians is that we follow Christ. The second rule is that we are on the move. When Philip meets with Nathanael, he invites him to follow Christ. Philip says, that Jesus is the one that Moses wrote about. Jesus is the son of Joseph from Nazareth. Nathanael is skeptical at first. He scoffs, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth."

Pay close attention to what Philip does next. Philip does not launch into a clever argument to convince Nathanael. Nor does he quote lengthy sections of scripture to him. Philip simply says, "Come and see."

So many of us modern Christians are uncomfortable with the idea of evangelism because we do not understand what we are doing. Our job is not to out argue others. Our job is not to force others to believe as we do. Our job is introducing people to Christ. Our job is help people have a genuine encounter with the risen Lord. It is Christ who then confronts, convinces, and converts people's hearts, so that they too follow him on the way.

The first rule of the Christian road is that we follow our guide. We follow Jesus. The second rule is that we come with him - and invite others to come and see. The third rule is that we actually see.

Christianity is often compared to being on a journey. We are people who are on the way. There is more than good intentions. There is movement.

There is a grade school riddle that goes something like this: Five frogs are sitting on a log. Three decide to jump off the log. How many frogs are left on the log? The answer: five.

I didn't say that three frogs actually jumped off the log. I said, they decided to jump. They haven't jumped yet.

There is a difference between deciding and acting. Christians are those who not only decide to follow Christ, they actually move. When we thus begin to follow Christ, we see.

John's gospel tells amazing things that the first disciples saw as they followed Jesus on the way. They saw healing, exorcisms, miracles, the transfiguration, and especially the resurrection.

The incredible thing is that Jesus says to those who follow him on the road, "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." (John 14:12-14)

It is a funny thing, every time I preach on this passage I feel the need to qualify it. So I usually point out that praying in Jesus' name is not a magical formula. Tacking on "in the name of Jesus," to our otherwise selfish and foolish requests, does not mean that God has to give us what we have asked for. Praying in the name of Jesus means praying for his will to be done, praying in the same spirit in which Jesus prayed.

So there I have just gone and qualified the passage again. As much as I feel that this is a legitimate qualification, I can't help but notice that Jesus himself did not feel the need to qualify his promise. His promise is mysterious, deep, and bold.

If we are not careful, we miss that point. We qualify and tame passages like this until we are content to merely do what we can humanly do and stop there. Jesus wants us to experience and do so much more than that.

"Follow me," says Jesus. "Come." Don't just have good intentions, move. "And see."

Let me challenge you this week to allow the promises of Christ to take hold of you and move you to see the glory of God at work. Open your eyes this week, watch how God is working with you, through you, around you, and even in spite of you. Follow . . . come . . . see.

Amen.