Mark 1:14-20

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen.17And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ 18And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

**FOLLOWING JESUS ONE STEP AT A TIME**

NO ONE COMMITTING TO CHURCH

Jesus has no tricks to draw in these disciples; he says follow and they follow. He doesn’t have to persuade them of anything. So we begin with a problem, namely you and I don’t behave that way. At least that’s not the way most of us function. If someone comes along and says, “follow me,” before you take a step you ask a question. “Why should I follow you?” “Where are you going?” And if the person says, “We’re going to church,” you’ll ask, “which church?” because you know that not all churches are alike. Some churches do strange things that you may make you feel odd. Methodists have a kind of church service that’s called a “Love Feast.” What’s that about? We are not so easy to convince that the beans that the church is selling are magic. We want to be 99% percent sure that the greeter is not going to be handing out snakes some morning, saying “if you trust in the Lord…”

HOW THE CHURCH RESPONDS TO SKEPTICISM

Now churches these days have a strategy for dealing with the skeptical religious consumer: we try to make the church more appealing. We come across as the friendly folks who accept everyone and everything. We have our greeters and ushers with the smiles painted on. We plan social activities. We serve doughnuts and coffee. And we don’t dare pry into your personal life or beliefs because WE WANT YOU TO FEEL WELCOME. That’s one strategy, and it succeeds in bringing in a few people…as long as they fit in with those unpublished expectations that the church has established…you know, how you dress on Sunday, or how disciplined your children are or how you want to change this or that. Then that welcome starts to wear out, and soon you’re about ready to start looking for another church. There was a survey done of churches, like “secret shoppers.” Consumers were paid to rate churches on a scale of friendliness.

What the survey found was that most churches were good at fellowship, but not at hospitality; guests are warmly invited into the fellowship hall for coffee and doughnuts, and then the long-time members branch off into their little cells, and the newcomer sits with other newcomers, if there happen to be other newcomers, and sip their coffee until they feel like leaving, and then they are bid a warm farewell by the long-time members. The bottom line is that 9 out of 10 have no desire to come back. That kind of church has become a closed club that will likely continue to dwindle in attendance until the last few club members are buried.

Another way we may try to appeal, and this is something that starts with the pastor, is that we try to tell our “audience” what we think they want to hear. Some of the biggest congregations in the world are “churches” that promote the belief that God wants you to be wealthy. Pastors will sell their books, explaining to you how scripture says that it’s God’s plan for you to live in a mansion and have all the comforts that you deserve. (I tell you, the Bible can be used to justify just about anything – all you have to do is find a verse that kinda says what you want to believe and share your belief with self-centered people who don’t read the Bible. It’s a perfect formula for a Spiritual disaster.

Other pastors feel that it is their mission to present Christian doctrine in a way that is intellectually satisfying to a congregation. And of course there are people out there who want concise doctrine, who want Christianity to be dignified by rationality and logic.

You know the pastor who speaks so far over your head that you figure either he really knows what he’s talking about or he’s completely out of his mind. The funny thing is that when we read the Bible, we don’t find Jesus spending a whole lot of time going over doctrine with his disciples. He keeps things very simple…

NEED TO GET BACK TO CHRIST

And here is where I believe so many churches have gone so far off track that they can be classified as train wrecks. We have stopped following Jesus Christ. Simply put, we are not disciples. I don’t mean all churches or all Christians, but the reason we have lost members over the past forty years is that we have tried to attract people by lowering the bar rather than raising it. Jesus was quite clear in regard to the cost of discipleship:

Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, while whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it. Whoever does not take up his cross daily is not worthy to be my disciple. Jesus taught that the most important thing that we must do as disciples is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves. And our enemy also our neighbor, and if you love Jesus, you will keep these commandments. This is the essence of discipleship.

PERSISTENCE IS THE KEY

Simple, but difficult. Jesus’ expectations are high, and this may make you feel a bad – “I haven’t done such a good job of loving my neighbor, particularly the neighbor who’s also my enemy” Well neither have I. I went to the bishop’s convocation; imagine a room full of pastors – over one hundred twenty – and there were pastors there that I avoided. I didn’t want to sit with them at dinner. I was not practicing radical hospitality to them.

But guess what? Jesus’ disciples didn’t do so well either. They spent a lot of time arguing about who was the greatest and which one was going to betray him. They scattered when he was arrested. Some friends they were. And once Jesus was gone, there were all sorts of problems: Churches were discriminating in their charity. One faction refused to share a meal with another.People were playing favorites among pastors.

But what stands to their credit is the fact that the disciples didn’t quit, and they recognized their own folly, and they recognized Jesus as their Lord and Master. Many disciples through the ages have stumbled severely and frequently, but they have been able to keep their eyes on Christ, to make corrections, and to keep making progress.

What is the takeaway? First, we need to ask ourselves that most important question: Are we disciples of Jesus Christ? Disciples don’t just hang around the campfire and sing “Kum-ba-ya.” Disciples don’t quibble over little things, or jockey for power within the church. Disciples recognize that they are servants of others – their primary concern is to love the people around them. Disciples walk with Jesus in those hard places that are not always pleasant. They know the radical nature of God’s kingdom, where caution is thrown to the wind and love breaks every barrier.

Does this describe us? Does it describe Bethel? That’s what our vision needs to be.

We need to be a fellowship of DISCIPLES who make more DISCIPLES, Not more members so that our plate offerings increase, but more disciples who are striving to love God with all their heart and all their mind and all their heart and all their soul.

And we need to push ourselves to constantly raise the bar, Not because we want to be worthy of God but because God is worthy, and deserves nothing less than our best.

What can you do this week, tomorrow, that is different from the way you’ve done things before? How will you push yourself to be a closer follower of Jesus Christ? That’s a question that only you can answer. Maybe you’ll make amends with that person down the block who you got into an argument with over the noise that his motorcycle made.

Maybe you’ll invite an old friend that you’ve fallen out of touch with over for lunch. Maybe you’ll invite him to church. Maybe you’ll spend a little more time in reading God’s word, to find out if Jesus actually said, “God helps those who help themselves.”

Maybe you’ll spend a little more time with God, asking him to change the way you feel about a particular person. And maybe, just maybe , you will witness a miracle as God heals a broken relationship, or reveals himself to you in ways you never imagined.

Regardless of what happens, DON’T STOP FOLLOWING JESUS. Remember that three years did not turn the disciples into saints, but it was enough to keep up the momentum. It was enough to get the disciples in line and ready to follow through with their mission. Let’s challenge ourselves to do one thing differently each day.

Instead of ignoring the clerk at the supermarket checkout, tell her to have a blessed day. Instead of watching that new show that’s really not so great, pick up a Bible and read next week’s lectionary readings. Instead of laughing when some acquaintance of yours says something demeaning about another ethnicity, remind him that God loves those people just as much as he loves us. And share with me what happens. Let’s work on our discipleship. Let’s take little concrete steps to where Jesus is leading. It may be dirty, dusty, and full of danger, but all the other paths are dark. Follow the light. Follow Jesus. Be a disciple.