

Date: January 27, 2008

SUNDAY: Ordinary 3 (Final in Brunswick)

SERMON: Called to Follow

Text(s): 1 Corinthians 1:4-18; 3:5-9; Matthew 4:12-23

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It was the pastor's last Sunday in the pulpit before moving on to a new call. Having preached what he thought was an appropriate sermon for the occasion, he stood for the final time greeting the parishioners at the door. One elderly lady with tears in her eyes shook his hand warmly and said, "Pastor, I don't know what we're going to do without you. I'm sure our next minister won't be as good as you."

The pastor was flattered, of course, but he replied in an appropriate tone of grateful humility, "Oh, I'm sure your next minister will be even better than me."

Whereupon the parishioner replied, "Oh no. I've been here through five ministers, and each one's been worse than the one before."

I suppose that's the importance of having a sense of history; it does give us a way to keep things in perspective.

Today is the last Sunday I will be your pastor, and I want you to know I'm sad about that. I know that many of you are as well. These past three months have been a rough time for all of us, and there have been many wounds inflicted in the body of Christ here at First Parish. Carol and I both want you to know how deeply touched and helped we have been personally by the scores of letters and cards and emails and phone calls we have received affirming us and offering words of support and comfort. We have been quite overwhelmed, and we're truly grateful for that.

The blows this church has suffered need not be fatal ones, however, either for you or for me. I have heard from many of you, expressions like, "I thought we were a church, and I thought things were supposed to be different in a church," or "I can't understand how things like this can happen in a church." But if there's one thing that

history, as well as our own experiences teach us, it's that the church is not a society of angels. We're still human beings, and we bring our humanity, warts and all, into the community of faith and into the presence of God every week. In fact, as one wag put it, the surest evidence that the church is of God is that after two thousand years of blunders, mistakes, and outright wickedness, it's still here. That's why when someone tells me that the reason they don't come to church is that there are too many hypocrites in it, I usually respond, "You're absolutely right, but don't let that keep you away. We always have room for one more." If we're really serious about being the church, then we are here, not because we've got all the answers or have arrived at perfection, but precisely in order to find ways to live and relate to one another in ways that are more truly humane. But it doesn't happen automatically and it doesn't happen fast. It's the work of a lifetime and perhaps even beyond a lifetime.

I was ordained in the United Methodist Church, and one of the key emphases of John Wesley, the 18th century father of Methodism was the notion that Christians are always, as he put it, "going on to perfection," which he defined as perfection in love. And of course, the "going on" is the operative part of that notion. So one of the questions asked of all candidates for ordination was "Are you going on to perfection?" One bishop overheard some snide grumbling on the part of some candidates for ordination about having to answer such an obviously antiquated question, and so when he addressed them he said, "I've heard some of you complaining that we should drop that question from our vows of ordination. But let me ask you this: if you're not going on to perfection, where are you going?"

In the opening greeting to the church in Corinth, St. Paul addresses his letter: "*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.*" The words "saint" and "sanctified" have roughly the same sense of Wesley's emphasis on going on to perfection in love. Saints are those

who are set apart by their baptisms to pursue that quest of becoming perfectly loving human beings, a quest that can only be undertaken in the company of others who are also on that same quest. It's that quest that sets them apart from other sinners like themselves. As Paul, and John Wesley, and all the other spiritual mentors of our tradition knew very well, however, none of us have yet arrived at perfection, and sometimes, it's harder to love the people with whom we're in community than it is to love a perfect stranger. So when Paul refers to the Christians in Corinth as "saints" or "those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus," he's seeing them in light of the common goal they are pursuing rather than as a term describing what they have already achieved.

In the extended greeting that was the opening of our lesson this morning, Paul tells them how thankful he is for all the spiritual gifts and graces that the saints in Corinth have been given, and how blessed they are to be so graced by the knowledge of God. Within their fellowship, they have everything they need to live fully into what they, in potential, are—those who are being perfected in love.

But then, in the very next paragraph, he expresses his utter dismay over the report that has come to him that the congregation has split into factions and are quarreling and squabbling with one another so that there are actual schisms opening up, divisions between one group and another, based on partisan loyalties to different pastors or church leaders. One group says, "We follow Paul's teachings," and another group says, "We prefer Apollos's, style," and another says, "We're fans of Peter," and yet another group, playing what they think is the ultimate trump card, says, "Hmph! We're the really spiritual ones; we belong to Christ."

Paul is appalled, to say the least. "What are you thinking!" he exclaims. *"Is Christ divided? Were you baptized into Paul or Apollos or Peter? Was Paul crucified for you? . . . What are Paul and Apollos and Peter after all—just*

servants of God through whose work you came to faith. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. For we are all God's servants, working together; we are God's field, God's building."

Paul knew, as any pastor knows, that the work of living into our calling to be saints is a lifetime occupation. We never get to retire from it. Becoming who and what we are in Christ is what the Christian life is all about. We never fully get there in this life. As long as we are embodied human beings, or as St. Francis of Assisi referred to his own human nature, as long as we're dragging "Brother Ass" around with us, we've still got work to do to become the saints God has called us to be. We will always have our work cut out for us, because becoming a genuine loving community does not come easily. All the pettiness, the short-sightedness, the spiritual ignorance or blindness, all the personal agendas, all the resentments, all the intrigues, all the selfishness or ego-trips that are part of all of our humanity don't disappear the minute we walk through the church door or emerge from the baptismal font. As one wise person (sounds like it could have been Woody Allen) put it, "my problem is that wherever I go, I go too."

If we're really serious about being the church, if we want to live up to our calling to be saints, then we will always have a lot of work to do, and it's hard work—the work of confessing our faults and failings to one another and to God, seeking forgiveness from one another, bearing patiently with one another when we find ourselves in disagreement, always being willing to go the second mile in order to be reconciled, speaking the truth to one another in love rather than in anger, becoming open and transparent rather than manipulative and controlling in our dealings with one another. This is why the church is not so much a haven for people who are already saints, but a hospital for sinners, where we can have heart transplants—learn new habits of the heart, where we can become a company of

wounded healers for one another.

Over the next few months and even the next few years, you as a congregation will have a great deal of that hard work to do, because there are deep and painful divisions right now. It's important to realize that this work will not be able to be done fast. Real wounds have been inflicted. Real hurts are felt. Real confession and real forgiveness will have to be offered. Healing takes time; unity will not happen quickly, but it can and will happen if there is a commitment on everyone's part to live into our calling to become in actuality what, in Christ, we already are. Realizing that God, in Christ, has already made our unity possible is the fundamental prerequisite for our being able to achieve it in actuality. As Paul says, "*Christ has broken down the middle wall of partition between us, making peace, by the blood of his cross.*" Our peace, our unity in Christ is a given; living into it is our work.

How do we do that, when we don't even feel ready to want to do that work? When we're angry or grieving or resentful or outraged or hurt, we don't feel much like doing anything except writing off everybody we're mad at, or writing off the church altogether.

Perhaps our gospel lesson can help us here. It reminds us that we are called to follow Jesus as disciples. That primary call, if we have heard it, will become the polestar, the celestial point of navigation for our lives if we allow it to. What are we really here for? To follow Jesus. It's that simple, and that difficult. When Matthew tells us how Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John from their livelihood as fishermen, and said "*Follow me*" the very economy and succinctness of Matthew's narrative makes it seem as though it were very easy for them to do that. Matthew says, "*And immediately, they left the boat and their father, and followed him.*" I suspect that in real time that word "immediately" was actually a fairly extended time. Given the group-oriented nature

of the society, James and John's leaving of their father would not have happened in an instant. Family obligations were sacred and binding. There was undoubtedly a lot of negotiation and preparation, and perhaps even a lot of arguing and fighting involved in that leaving. Matthew intends, I suspect, for us to understand "immediately" as signifying the momentousness of responding to the call of Christ. It's not so much a chronological moment as it is a decisive moment— a moment of encounter that forever changes the shape and direction of their lives.

That's what answering the call of Jesus to be disciples is; it's a decisive moment that changes the shape and direction of our lives from that point on. Once we settle that, we have a long road ahead and a lot of hard work, and more than our fair share of detours and roadblocks and crosses to bear. Those come with the territory. But if we keep our calling clear, if we commit ourselves to follow on the road of discipleship, we can overcome the obstacles and bear the crosses, because we are in the company of the One whose disciples we are. Christ is with us.

One of my own models for how to follow Jesus faithfully as a disciple is Albert Schweitzer. Carol and I vacationed for a week in the Alsatian village of Gunsbach where he grew up, and where he built a house to which he returned whenever he came back from his clinic in the jungles of Gabon. During that week, I particularly enjoyed walking the path up the steep hillside behind the village to the stone bench where a sign said that Schweitzer used to come on that walk almost every day and sit on that bench to think and meditate, looking out over the Münster valley. I could imagine him there, in the days before he gave up his life as a prominent theologian who wrote the ground-breaking classic, "*The Quest for the Historical Jesus*," and his second career as one of Europe's leading organists and *the* leading authority on the music of Bach. Perhaps it was even sitting on that bench that those lines came to him, which are the

closing lines of his book on Jesus, and which inspired him to study medicine and go off, as he put it, “for Jesus’ sake,” to found a medical clinic in west Africa.

Some of his detractors have categorized this passage as romanticized, sentimental drivel, not worthy of Schweitzer’s intellect and genius, but over the years, I have found myself returning again and again to them as a compelling reminder to myself of my own call to follow Jesus as a disciple.

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

My prayer for myself and for you, the congregation whom I have grown to love, is that we will both remember that we are called by the same Christ who called Peter and Andrew and James and John. And though we are passing through some “toils, and conflicts, and sufferings,” right now, we are passing through them in his fellowship, and it is precisely here in this time, if we are responding to his call to follow, that we will learn, or re-learn, in our own experience who He is. If we will be faithful in doing whatever hard work we have to do to find unity and reconciliation, I have no doubt that this congregation will emerge into a place of greater fruitfulness and strength of purpose. God bless us all, and grant us grace to faithfully follow our risen Lord as disciples.