5-17-20 online Faith to Follow Rev. Amy Haines

Jn 21:15-19 Easter Season/Grads

What images come to mind when you hear the words “follow me”?

Do you picture children playing the game “Follow the Leader,” where they have to imitate the leader’s words and actions? Do you picture youth getting in trouble when they follow someone into mischief? Do you picture a friend whom you trust? Do you picture Jesus reaching out his hand to you?

When I hear the words “follow me” I think back to October 1989 when I got in trouble for following my friends. The band seniors decided to have a senior skip day from band practice. I got in trouble for not telling my parents and following my friends.

When I hear the words “follow me” I think back to the summer of 1994 when I and my youth group kids had to follow our work camp guide across a swollen stream. We were working on building a wilderness cabin on a mountain and we had to trust that our guide knew the safest place to cross the stream without getting caught in the current.

When I hear the words “follow me” I think about my various changes in appointment, when I have to follow where the Bishop and Cabinet send me, trusting that God is with me wherever I go.

..S. I. McMillen tells a story of a young woman who wanted to go to college, but her heart sank when she read the question on the application blank that asked, "Are you a leader?" Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst.

To her surprise, she received this letter from the college:

"Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."

--S. I. McMillen. *None of These Diseases* sermonillustrations.com:following

I confess, often it is hard for me to be a follower rather than a leader. It is hard to not be in control. It is hard to trust someone else to lead, and lead in a different way that I would. It takes faith for me to follow.

How hard has the past two months been for you, to trust and follow the advice of our government and health care leaders? How hard has it been for you, when there’s no app that will immediately fix our circumstance, or no set guidelines to navigate next steps?

How hard has the past two months been for you without the gathered community of the church to encourage you to follow Jesus? How hard has it been to return to our roots of family worship and personal study and service to our neighbors?

No one ever said life would be easy. And no one ever said following Jesus would be easy. If you’ve been told that, you’ve not heard the truth. Life is full of unexpected curveballs. Cancer. Pink slips. Breakups. Pandemics. New opportunities. New friends who become closer than siblings. New understandings. New ways to live by faith.

Following Jesus does not mean we will have all of the answers to every problem and question of life. Rather, following Jesus means that we trust Jesus to guide us, step by faithful step, even when the road ahead is not clear.

Generations before us have lived by such faith and trust and hope in the midst of storm and calm, tragedy and celebration.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to be a follower of Jesus. To follow where Jesus leads, even out of our comfort zones. To trust that Jesus’ ways are better than our ways. To continue to learn more about God, faith, and faithful living even as we follow.

Literally, to be a follower of Jesus means we take the same road as him. Yet, consider the road Jesus traveled. His road was not simply the good life. His road was not the fulfillment of his own desires. Rather, his road was the road of sacrifice and service and suffering. And his road was also the road of God’s ways of love and forgiveness and hope and community.

If you struggle to have the faith to follow a crucified and risen Savior and Lord, know that you are not alone. The original disciples of Jesus, those men and women who traveled with Jesus for three years on this earth, they, too, struggled to follow faithfully. They still expected a warrior king, not a suffering servant. They expected God’s kingdom to overthrow Rome, not usher in a new way of being in relationship with others. They never expected Jesus to be killed as a common criminal—nor did they expect his resurrection from the dead.

In those days and weeks following Jesus’ death and resurrection, the original disciples struggled to wrap their head and heart around a new way of living, following a risen Savior. They never knew when Jesus would show up in their midst. Behind locked doors. Beside the Sea of Galilee.

They pondered how their role was shifting, from disciple to apostle. I imagine the task ahead of them was a bit daunting, to continue Jesus’ ministry without Jesus present with them! Even with the promise of the Holy Spirit to guide them, they still struggled with the faith to follow.

In our Scripture passage today, Jesus once again invited Simon Peter to have the faith to follow.

The disciples were now back in Galilee. Peter and six other disciples had spent the night fishing, yet had caught nothing by daybreak, until Jesus showed up and told them to fish on the other side of the boat. After breakfast together along the seashore, Jesus took Peter aside.

“Peter, do you love me?” Jesus asked.

Keep in mind that Peter was still struggling with all that had happened while in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. He remembered Jesus saying at supper that one of them would betray him, and all of disciples asking, “Is it I?” He recalled struggling to stay awake in the garden, while Jesus prayed in anguish. He remembered being brash, and cutting off the ear of the high priest’s servant, and being chastised by Jesus for violence. He recalled the feelings of fear and failure as he fled the garden, then followed Jesus throughout that long night. He remembered denying that he was a follower of Jesus, fearful they would also arrest him.

Three times that fateful night, Peter denied his identity as one of Jesus’ disciples. Now, along the shore, three times Jesus asked Peter, “Peter, do you love me?”

And three times, Peter replied, “Lord, you know I love you.”

In response, Jesus invited Peter to “Feed my lambs.” “Tend my sheep.” “Feed my sheep.”

Along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, in the same place that Jesus first invited Peter to leave his nets and follow him, Jesus invited Peter once again to have the faith to follow him. There, Jesus encouraged Peter to re-claim his identity as a disciple of Jesus. There, Jesus commissioned Peter to carry on Jesus’ ministry, by following the same road as Jesus.

As a follower of Jesus, Peter’s journey will end in sacrifice and suffering, living and dying to proclaim the good news of Jesus. Yet along the way, Peter will invite men and women into the community of faith—Jews and Gentiles, servants and free—inviting them into a new way of living by God’s kingdom ways here and now. Along the way, Peter will offer forgiveness and hope, love and compassion, following in the footsteps of Jesus.

When Jesus invited Peter to feed his lambs and tend his sheep, he was inviting Peter to love others through word and action. To love the faithful who would follow Jesus, encouraging them to live by faith, hope and trust. To care for the community of believers as they sought to have the faith to follow Jesus. To share with the world the good news of a Savior.

That same invitation is given to us today.

Jesus looks into our hearts and asks, “Do you love me?”

Then love your neighbor. Care for one another. Live out your faith in word and action. Have the courage to follow Jesus.

Every day, we are given choices. Choices of who to follow. Choices of how to live. Choice of how to share the transforming love of Jesus. We can choose to follow Jesus or our favorite personality. We can choose to encourage others or pull others down. We can choose to believe trusted experts or conspiracy theories. We can choose to be kind or be rude. We can choose to care for others or live by selfish desires. We can choose to speak up against injustice or remain silent. We can choose to plant seeds of hope or seeds of discord. We can choose to believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord or view Jesus as only a teacher and prophet.

Our choices reflect who we follow and what we believe in.

As Dianne Bergant reminds us,

“It is not enough to just proclaim: I believe in Jesus! We have all been called to witness to that faith. Whether we realize it or not, our daily lives cry out as loudly as did the preaching of the apostles. This includes our interactions with family members and neighbors, companions in the workplace and sales personnel, even strangers on social media or in the grocery aisle. Faith in the resurrection of Jesus ought to influence the decisions that we make about everything in life.

Jesus extends the invitation: “Follow me.” Our manner of living reveals how we have responded.” --Dianne Bergant 4-25-04 americanmagazine.org adapted

As we move slowly into a new way of living in our society, among a wide array of opinions and convictions, may our living reflect our faith in Jesus. May our footsteps reflect God’s ways of caring for one another, even as we disagree with how to move forward.

Generations before us have had the faith to follow Jesus. Generations before us have been asked if they love Jesus, and have responded with words, attitudes, and actions that reflect God’s ways.

Graduates, I know this is not the celebration you expected. I give thanks for your perseverance and resilience, even as you grieve and hope and look ahead.

Remember that no matter where our journeys take us, no matter what curveballs life throws at us, we are not alone. We are claimed as God’s beloved. We are invited to journey with Jesus.

We are empowered by the Holy Spirit. We are part of the community of faith, the body of Christ, the Church universal.

Graduates, my prayer for you today, as you begin a new chapter in your journey of life, is a prayer I have for all of us—Choose to follow Jesus. Choose to live by faith. Choose to share the good news of God’s presence and forgiveness, God’s hope and grace, God’s love and compassion.

May our living reflect our faith in ways that Jesus is glorified in all we say and do.

Let us pray.