

“Follow Me” / Mark 1:14-20 / 25 January 2015

“Follow him?” old Father Zebedee demands from the boat, as his two sons go chasing down the beach after the stranger, Jesus. “Follow that guy? You're going to leave your old father and follow...him?” Well, yes. Following doesn't always make sense. You do it when you hear the call. You do it when you feel the need. Sometimes you just follow because you know it's time. You follow when something deep in your spirit tells you that the time is right. Sometimes you really have no choice but to follow. We value leadership, but we all of us follow.

You know, we all fell in and towed the party line when they told us that Pluto was a planet. And then when they decided that it was not, well, how quickly we gave up on old Pluto and followed them again. Yes, we're followers. They told us the earth was the center of the universe, and we said, “Okay.” Then they changed their minds and said that the sun stood at the center of all things. And again we said, “Okay.” Now we know that the sun is just one of many stars, in a remote corner of a remote galaxy. And again, we say, “Okay.” And still humanity lives and loves as we did when the earth was flat.

Think of all the trends we've chased-after, down through the years! Celebrity trends, philosophical trends, religious trends, medical trends, dietary trends! When their time was upon us, we fell in line with all the others, and we followed. Do you remember, that people actually used to heat Dr. Pepper over the stove and serve it hot, in a mug, like coffee. I seem to recall a day, early, early in my life, when gelatin was used to make things stand up on a plate—things like shredded cabbage, and carrots, and fruit cocktail, and even different kinds of meat. They could all be suspended in clear gelatin to form some kind of erect salad that has long since disappeared from the earth. As recently as Michelle's bridal shower, there were still sandwich loaves in this world, which looked like cakes, covered in cream cheese and stuffed with ham and eggs, separated by layers of white bread. They were a curious holdover from another age that, like those tiny pillow-shaped chalky mints, survives only at certain provincial pre-nuptial events, namely bridal showers. The Atkins Diet seemed to be sweeping the Western World ten years ago. It allowed all animal products and no carbohydrates. But look now. Everyone who is able has returned to white flour. We followed when the time was upon us; it just didn't last.

There have been medical trends, too. As children, which of us didn't take Bayer orange-flavored chewable aspirin, until our mothers found out about Reye's Syndrome? They don't sell the stuff for kids anymore, but they're still selling it to all of us who were kids back in those days, because now we use it to prevent heart attacks. It looks and tastes exactly as it did four or more decades ago. I heard, in the early 90s, that Prozac was going to revolutionize the way we treat depression, and OCD, and eating disorders. Just a few weeks ago, I saw an article that compared Prozac to bloodletting with leaches, calling it old-fashioned and dangerous. But we followed-after these things in their day.

We've followed after political fads and lifestyle trends. And some of us have gotten stuck in one or two of them long after the rest of the world has moved on. I know a handful of people who live as if the Great Depression still holds them in its grip, despite the fact that it never held them; it held their grandparents. In the 1950s, the world was ours, and everything was getting better. In the 1960s, we discovered that some people were excluded from the American dream. Then 1970s came along and said, “Cool it, man, you got to chill out, dig?” The 1980s said, “It's okay to dress like lunatics, but mostly just sit down and shut up.” And the 90s, well, I missed those somehow.

And now we've wandered into a day when our elected officials ought to wear the logos of their corporate sponsors on their jackets, like NASCAR drivers. Each of these trends we followed quietly when its time came, when it called for us. And will we not follow the next thing out of them? We're followers, though we don't like to believe it.

Which of us was immune to Jordache Jeans, and Reeboks, and penny loafers, and shoulder pads? Which of us thought ourselves above silk shirts, airbrushed tee-shirts, and sleeveless tee-shirts? (Okay, I actually did think myself above those.) Today, the word “Jordache” will send your spell-check

into paroxysms of confusion. Perhaps you even wore a sweater tied around your neck by its sleeves. You might have. There were cargo pants, and parachute pants, and leg-warmers, and mullets, and rat tails, and side pony tails. Which of us who survived those days had the courage to stand up and protest? Which of us looked on all the tomfoolery of 1980s fashion and decided to opt out of the whole thing altogether, like John the Baptist in his animal pelts? Very, very few people in this world have the energy and the imagination to strike off in their own direction and re-create for themselves the wheels of fashion, and diet, and faith. It's not as if any of us has stood solitary against the tides of history and insisted that we are steadfast members of the Federalist party, like John Adams. Most people these days believe that they can develop their own little private system of faith, their very own road to God. But you don't have to look very closely to see that there's nothing very original about most of these individuals' paths. Even those who fancy themselves quite original, even they follow lesser-known trails that they did not blaze through trackless wastes of history, trails of science, and politics, and diet, and fashion, and religion. We follow. It's who we are and what we do. And old Father Zebedee hates it!

Poor old Zebedee, back in the boat with the hired hands. He's mad, I can tell you that. I can just hear him yelling at his two sons, James and John, as they disappear down the beach with this questionable stranger. "*Follow* him? "*Follow him?* Not so fast, fellas. Do you even know this guy? Do you have any idea where he might lead you? James, John! C'mon, show a little common sense! You don't just abandon everything and go chasing after any stranger who invites you to follow. Who's going to help me keep the family business afloat—quite literally? I'm getting too old to be doing this by myself. Hey, haven't you guys heard about the poisoned Kool Aid, and Jim Jones, and the Branch Davidians in Waco? You sons of mine, don't you know about Heaven's Gate, and that strange suicide cult in Switzerland with their identical tennis shoes? Followers come to bad ends! I'm telling you, don't do it. You'll regret it if you follow this Jesus. Look at you, a pair of lemmings, following some ragamuffin off a cliff! Why do you have to be such followers anyway? Followers! I was hoping between the two of you I might just get a leader instead of another dumb follower!" Oh, Zebedee is mad, I'm sure. He's jumping up and down and stamping his feet so hard, the boat's about to tip.

But the old man's scolding is all to no avail. For when the time is right in a young person's life, or any person's life, he or she will up and follow. And the time is fulfilled for James and John and for Andrew and Peter. The time is fulfilled, whether through boredom or ambition, I do not know. But I know that they must up and follow, for we have all done it. We have all chosen whom to follow through this life of years, and we chose most of our influences rather early. Old Father Zebedee's not only mad; he's right, too. His sons will regret following Jesus. The hour will come when they rue the day this wayfaring preacher showed up on the beaches of their lives and bid them follow.

But by then it will be too late, for what Zebedee doesn't know (and what you and I hate to admit) is that we must all of us follow someone through this world. Did you notice at the very beginning of our reading that even Jesus is following in the tradition of John the Baptist? It was only after the Baptizer was arrested that Jesus stepped up to start doing what the old prophet of the Jordan used to do—except without the water. Jesus, too, had influences, people that he followed! Of course, in music, and in art, and in science, and even in philosophy and religion, there have been some great and amazingly original luminaries. But even Wagner had to learn his chords; even Einstein had to memorize his periodic table. Marcus Borg, the great practical theologian of our day, who died this past weekend, even he had to memorize his Greek verb paradigms. For anyone who would lead must follow. And anyone who would succeed must follow. And anyone who would find a good and meaningful way to live out their life; anyone who would find satisfaction and fulfillment; anyone who would bring peace to his or her own heart and to the world; anyone who would make bold new advances in science, and medicine, and faith, and social justice—all of them must follow...going further, perhaps, than has ever been gone before. But still, we follow. When the time is upon us, we follow.

And so, let me ask you this: Whom do you follow? Your life is largely governed by a committee of people who have influenced you down through the years, people both living and dead; who sits on that committee in your mind? Who chairs your governing board? Is it someone you love, or loved? How hard it is for us when the person who chairs the committee in our head is someone we didn't like or trust! Mainly, we will follow-after the people who love us, but not always, sadly. We all of us follow someone. Whom do you follow? Who will follow you?

Unless you're the lead dog, they say, the view doesn't change. A young fellow was trying to drive home when a blizzard struck. He was snow-blinded, inching down the road, not knowing which way to go or if he was headed into a ditch. He remembered what his father once told him. "If you ever get stuck in a snowstorm, wait for a snow plow, then follow it." And so the young man waited until a snow plow finally did come along. He followed the plow for about forty-five minutes, until the driver got out and asked him what he was doing. The fellow explained the advice that his father had given him, to follow a plow if he ever got lost in a snowstorm. The driver nodded and said, "Okay. Well, when I'm done with the parking lot here at K-Mart, then you can follow me over to the Home Depot." We live with the illusion that following is for lazy people and fools. We live with that old frontier mentality that says a person can and must forge his or her own way through this world, that we begin fresh at birth with nothing but the raw materials, and no one to blame but ourselves if we don't achieve success.

The "self-made man" was the dream of the pioneers. You can't blame them for fleeing a stratified Europe where social class determined your lot in life. They were casting off the darkness of the old regime, where the kings and nobles were deemed closer to God than the common folk were. They were radical do-it-yourselfers, and their attitudes toward life have made their way into the American DNA. They gave us the myth of the self-made man, which is more current among some groups of people than others. It's so prevalent in my wife's family that you're truly considered a failure unless you build your own house. You can't buy a house that someone else built; you've got to build your own, preferably with your own two hands. It doesn't matter if it's not a nice house. It doesn't matter if you don't have much in life. It doesn't matter how high you climb, as long as you never asked for any help from anyone. The great irony of that way of thinking is that it, too, is handed down from generation to generation. It originated with some long-forgotten pioneers, and it gets inherited by modern folks. But it's not original to any of the supposedly "self made" people who unquestioningly adopt it. We're followers, all of us, followers. Jesus' primary command was not, "Be strong and rely on no one." It was, "Follow me.

Each of us is the work of many hands, the result of many influences. We follow-after musicians, and artists, and politicians, and religious leaders, so-called trendsetters, but they too are following someone who went before. Even if we choose to the the role of rebel, well, then we're following in the trail of James Dean and Howard Stern, and it's not a trail that they blazed. Whom do you follow through life?

Yes, old Father Zebedee is about to blow a gasket, he's so mad. I think mostly he just wanted his sons, James and John, to follow-after him. But Jesus is always turning up on the beaches of our toilsome world, while you and I go about the business of mending our nets, doing our thing, living our lives. And his command is still the same: "Follow me." Jesus does not ask for lives of careful virtue, but lives of reckless generosity. Jesus does not tell you what to believe, but shows you how to live. Jesus' call is to forgiveness and new beginnings. And his words are still the same. "You're going to follow someone, so follow me. The time is fulfilled. It's time for you to follow me." Amen.