

2 Epiphany B
Following without Following

January 14, 2024
John 1:43-51

When someone gives the command, “Follow me,” that usually means to line up behind him and stay behind him wherever he might go. That is the literal meaning of the Greek verb translated, “to follow.” This Greek word has come into English as “acolyte.” Acolytes originally were boys or men, who *followed* the priest around the chancel, helping where they were needed. It was almost like they were playing, follow-the-leader.

If Jesus meant, “walk behind me wherever I go,” Philip failed. Philip didn’t walk behind Jesus. He didn’t even go with Jesus. He headed off in a different direction. He found Nathanael. He told him about Jesus. He invited him, “Come and see.” It wasn’t like Jesus was standing right next to him. They had to go somewhere else to see Jesus. Philip hadn’t walked behind Jesus.

We could conclude that Philip disobeyed Jesus’ command when he went off on his own to find Nathanael. He didn’t follow behind Jesus. He went a different direction.

However, this same Greek word took on some other meanings. Like in English, “to follow,” can mean “to obey.” When soldiers *follow* orders, they obey them. They do what they have been told to do: “Go over there” or “stay here.” Following such commands means not walking behind the leader.

“To follow” also came to mean, “to be a disciple of.” Originally, a teacher’s disciples followed the teacher around and did what they did, heard what they said, learned to repeat what they said. The ancient disciples were much more like apprentices in our day who follow the master craftsman around to different job sites to watch and listen so that they might replicate what the master says and does. They are also there to follow any orders the master craftsman might give them. Disciples were not students who sat at desks and listened to a teacher give a lecture. Disciples followed a teacher around the country to learn from them. The people following a teacher were disciples.

As Lutheran Christians, we *follow* the teachings of Martin Luther. We follow him without actually following him. (I’ll be saying a few things about Martin Luther in the adult class later this morning.)

The earliest Christians were called, “followers of the way” They were living in a way that was consistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ. “To follow” didn’t mean to walk behind the leader, but to live in a similar way as the leader. It means to take what the master taught and make it part of one’s own life.

If we understand the words Jesus said to Nathanael, “Follow me,” to mean, “Be my disciple,” then we can consider Nathanael’s actions to illustrate what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. That is, being Jesus’ disciple means going to others and telling them about Jesus. Being Jesus’ disciple means inviting others, “Come and see,” so that they might have their own experiences with Jesus. Following Jesus means, at times, not literally walking behind Jesus, but sometimes going another way to reach other people with the news about Jesus of Nazareth: the one written about in the Law and the Prophets; the Son of God, the king of Israel.

Telling others about Jesus is a pattern that goes throughout the first chapter of John. John the Baptist tells two of his disciples about Jesus. They come and see for themselves. One of those who came and saw was Andrew. He goes and tells his brother Peter about Jesus: “We have found the Messiah.” Andrew brings Peter to Jesus.

Our text tells us that Philip was from same town as Andrew and Peter. When Philip says, “**We** have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets.” Who are the “we”? It’s likely that he is referring to himself and Andrew and Peter. The two must have told him about Jesus – even if it’s not recorded in John. Philip goes and tells Nathanael about Jesus.

When Nathanael comes and sees Jesus, he discovers that Jesus already knew him. Jesus was involved in Philip’s life before Philip ever got up and came to Jesus. Jesus knows Nathanael. Jesus knows about the fig tree – whatever that might mean. That illustrates a key change that has taken place in missionary work over the past few generations. We used to have the attitude, a bit arrogantly, that we Christians had Jesus and we were bringing him to the pagans. We took Jesus to Africa. We took Jesus to China.

In recent years, we’ve had the better attitude that Jesus is already there – wherever we are going. We might even learn something about Jesus from others. We receive from others as much or more than we have to give. Jesus already knows them. Jesus is already involved in their lives, even if they don’t yet know it or believe it.

A friend wrote after going to Haiti not long after their devastating earthquake. She learned more about hope there than she thought possible. When she saw and heard the children singing and dancing amidst the rubble, she came to understand hope and joy and trusting the future to God more than she ever did before. God teaches us through other people – and they don’t have to be believers.

The Greek word translated “to find” is one most of you know – at least one form of it: *eureka* is the Greek word for “I have found.” It’s also the name of a vacuum cleaner manufacturer and the name of a number of towns in the United States. The word is used when Philip talks about “finding” Jesus. Jesus wasn’t lost. I believe that if God wanted to hide from us humans, we would never find God. God reveals himself to us. We might experience it as finding God, but God was really there all the time.

According to the legend, the ruler Hiero II asked Archimedes to find a method for determining whether a crown was pure gold or mixed with silver. One day when Archimedes stepped into his bath and noticed that the water rose as he sat down, he ran out of the house naked shouting, “Eureka! Eureka!” (= “I have found [it]”).

Archimedes did not “find” this truth by searching after it – although he may have spent days thinking about a solution to the problem. His “find” came as an unexpected surprise as he watched water rise when he got into a bathtub. It’s almost as if the truth found him more than he finding the truth. It was something that was there all the time. He may have noticed the rising bathtub water hundreds of times before, but its significance didn’t “click” in his brain until that “eureka” moment.

The Greek word, more than our English word, “find,” carries with it the sense of discovering something that was already there. It’s more like having our minds opened up to understand something that had already been in front of us all the time. We just hadn’t recognized it yet. It’s almost like that other thing or idea found us. It is the light bulb going off in our heads.

God is present and active in the world even for people who do not yet recognize it. We confess that God created us and all that exists. This means that God created all those people who do not yet believe in God. Our belief means that we approach them and talk to them as people created by God – people created in the image of God – even if they don’t know or believe it. Hopefully, we can help them come to understand and believe in God their creator.

We are told that the Holy Spirit blows wherever it wills. God's Spirit is not limited to only people who believe in Jesus Christ, but is blowing wherever it wills – I believe that it includes even the unbelievers. God's Spirit can be involved in their lives without them knowing or believing it yet. Our belief means that we approach others and talk to them as if the Spirit is already doing something in their lives – even if they don't know or believe it. Hopefully, we can help them come to understand and believe that God's Spirit is working in their lives.

In the most famous biblical verse, John 3:16: we declare that God so loved the world. It doesn't say that God only loves believers. Many of the people of the world don't know that God loves them. Their lack of knowledge or belief doesn't keep God from loving them. Hopefully, we can help them understand and believe and appreciate the love God has been showing them.

It is part of our calling as people who follow Jesus, to tell the people in the world that God loves them; that Jesus came to die for them, that their sins, guilt, shame, is forgiven by God; that God's Spirit comes into their lives to empower them to become more like God intends them to be; that the church is the place where God gives them the assurance that they are loved and accepted and forgiven and promised an eternal life.

We will discover in sharing such a message about Jesus to others, we will come to be understand our own faith. We will find things that have always been there, but now become clearer to us. Sometimes, to follow Jesus, to be his faithful disciples, mean that we don't follow him, but go in another direction to take the good news to people who need to hear about Jesus. There we discover that Jesus was already there – and teaches us through those other people.