

Collecting Followers: The Before and After of “Immediately”

Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO

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Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was handed over to prison, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the good news about God, and saying, “The right time is fulfilled, and the rule of God has arrived. Turn around and put faith in the good news.” And going along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting nets in the seas, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Come after me, and I’ll make you become fishers for people.” And immediately leaving the nets they followed him. And going ahead a little further, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother in the boat preparing the nets. And immediately he called them. And leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired workers, they went off after him.

What does it take to be a leader? What does it take to have people follow you? And, what are the causes that are worth leading?

There’s another side to those questions, too – what does it take to be a follower? What does it take to let someone lead you? And, what are the causes that are worth following?

There’s something about Jesus that seems to be worth following. People meet Jesus, and they are changed. Whatever their deepest need is, Jesus meets it. Then those people tell others what happened, and other people start to follow, too. Jesus teaches, heals, and *lives* in a way that makes people want to follow, and makes people want to tell everyone else about him.

In this story, we don’t really know why these fishermen decided to listen when Jesus called out to them and told them to follow him. For whatever reason, Jesus was worth following. By the end of his ministry, he collects *thousands* of disciples, not just twelve, and after 2000 years that number has multiplied to billions over the years. Through person-to-person witness, through the power of being something worthy to follow, the good news that Christ proclaimed as he came into Galilee has spread.

Today is Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday. Tomorrow marks the national observation of Martin Luther King, Jr Day. We celebrate it as a country because of the Civil Rights Movement’s importance to our national community, our national pride, the cause of freedom that needs to be championed again and again in the face of persecution and oppression. We celebrate it in *worship* because of the Civil Rights Movement’s importance to God’s desire for the unity of all of God’s children, for the recognition that our *family* was broken, and for the recognition that a

man, a flawed human being, followed God's call to non-violently push the power of "society" to recognize the value and rights of every human being, no matter the color, no matter the class. We celebrate this man, this movement in worship because we recognize that we still have work to do, that God is *still* calling us, and that God's beloved community is still broken.

What does it take to be a leader? What are the causes that are worth leading? What does it take to be a follower? What are the causes worth following?

I think we can learn a few lessons about leadership from Martin Luther King *and* from Jesus of Nazareth. So here are three characteristics of leadership that *I* want to learn from these two leaders – will you learn them with me?

First – the leadership of following. Leading and following aren't all that different.

Each and every person is a leader. Each person has the opportunity to give example and leadership to another's journey. Leadership is about invitation and *acceptance*, giving *and* receiving.

Leadership is about following the examples of others who have come before us, who have modeled for us something that pulls at us and says "that's what I want."

There's a quote by Martin Luther King from his first speech when leading the Birmingham citywide bus boycott. King declared, "We have no alternative but to protest. For many years we have shown an amazing patience. We have sometimes given our white brothers the feeling that we liked the way we were being treated. But we come here tonight to be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice."¹

The cause that Martin Luther King, Jr became the spokesperson for was worth leading, worth following, because there was no other alternative, there was no more possibility of *waiting* for freedom and justice. The life of oppression had become unbearable, yet again.

MLK was a leader because he followed the examples that had come before him – of oppression that had been overcome in the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, in the story of Jesus the Christ who led the Hebrews *and* Gentiles out of a hopelessness and oppression under the Roman empire, transforming an empire and all the world in ages to come through a transformation of individual minds that were turned toward forgiveness and love.

¹ <http://www.biography.com/people/martin-luther-king-jr-9365086>

These leaders were *not* creating something completely new – they were following the examples of love and courage that had come before and that were in their midst in the present, in examples like Rosa Parks and John the Baptist, and that had led to transformation into *life* instead of the death of oppression.

What was happening in the lives of the disciples, of Simon and Andrew and James and John, right before the “immediately” when Jesus called them? Was it a life that couldn’t be tolerated anymore? Are these disciples *only* followers, or did they *lead* the way for others, as well?

Second characteristic of leadership – The leadership of listening.

In order to lead one must listen – listen to one’s own faith journey, one’s own experience of the world, and *then* one has to have the courage to accept that things may not be right in the world and to accept that they can be better *through your actions*.

Yes, it takes courage to do that. Once you’ve accepted that *you* can be a part of making the world better, of making *your* life better and *other people’s* lives better, your life will be different. And different is hard. Different means not knowing what’s going to happen next. When you truly listen and accept what you hear, accept that you have a part in responding, you are truly being a leader. All it takes is listening, and accepting.

Third aspect of leadership – the leadership of calling others.

A leader attracts others, and calls others to walk the same path. To call others, one has to be walking the road already. To call others to a cause, one has to be willing to live life with them.

Too often we take the easy way out and tell others what they *should* be doing. What others *should* be leading. We may even go so far as to tell ourselves what we *should* be following! I think it gives us a sense of at least getting part of it right – we can name the right things, but we aren’t willing to actually change actions, routine, comfort, in order to walk the road, in order to follow, in order to *lead*.

We’ve seen the examples of Jesus in the midst of the Roman empire; we’ve seen the example of Martin Luther King in the midst of the Jim Crow laws era; we’ve seen examples like Mahatma Gandhi in the midst of the British empire, reconciling Hindus and Muslims.

What about Colorado Springs? Where might God be calling us into the relationship and following and leading in our community?

There's plenty of "brokenness" to choose from. Evangelical vs liberal vs atheist. Environmentalists vs developer. Interfaith – Islam, Christianity, Judaism. Business owners and shoppers vs. panhandlers and loiterers (NOT "homeless").

Here in Colorado Springs, we can remember those traits of leadership – the leadership of following – following the examples that have come before us, trusting in the possibility of transformation. The leadership of listening - being willing to recognize that something could be better, and that *you* could be a part of making it better. And the leadership of calling others – first walking the road, and asking others to join us on it.

We'll start hearing that from political candidates right about now, and whether or not we agree with their strategies for making it better, we can support them in their efforts and keep them accountable to a vision that upholds humanity, and relationship, and inviting the entire community into being in relationship with one another – not small communities competing for different interests. The entire community is better when we are all working for *each other's* interests.

There is a "fishers of people" impact when other people *see* your investment – that you're walking the road already, and that you are committed to being in relationship, to listening. It's what we do we come together on Sunday to worship, it's what we do when we meet and plan throughout the week to do ministry outside of these walls, and continue to invite people into these walls. We are *invested*. We are walking the road already.

Jesus "immediately" calling Simon and Andrew, James and John. There's a sense of urgency with that word, "immediately." And life on the other side of that word is not the same as it was before. When you see an opportunity, act on it. Whether that is leading or following. Sometimes if you wait you might talk yourself out of it. You might start thinking too much about how life will be different.

But there is evil in the world, and people will follow leaders who put them in danger, who make the world a worse place, too, because of the same things. Out of same desires for something better, something more. The peace of Christianity can be and has been turned into violence, centuries ago and through today, when persecution of gay, lesbian, and transgender men and women has turned into evil acts of violence, including murder. The same has happened in extremist sects of Islam.

We cannot afford to wait for *other* leaders to respond to brokenness. We have the message of love to enact for the world. What are you leading? What are you following? Do your actions and your words speak of your following God? Does your leadership *listen* to the world around you? Does your experience of the world tell you that *it can be better*, and that *you* can make it better?

Follow. Listen. Call others. And lead our community into the unified kingdom of God's love.

Amen.

Good MLK Day video:

<http://www.saltproject.org/christian-video-resources-for-small-groups/i-have-a-dream>