

Hosea 5:15-6:6; Psalm 50:7-15; Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

“Follow me”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Jesus’ words, “*Follow me*” are not easy words. These words are both an invitation to journey with Jesus, and a command of discipleship to Jesus. To follow Jesus is to walk with him as a disciple. To be a disciple is to struggle with these two easy sounding but challenging words. All your life, may you follow Jesus with a simple but profound trust that he is guiding you and walking with you in every life chapter.

There is a painting by Caravaggio that I have admired for many years titled, “The Calling of St. Matthew.” This painting is part of the altarpiece in the Contarelli Chapel in Rome and depicts the moment Jesus called Matthew to follow him. In Caravaggio’s painting, Matthew appears utterly surprised, pointing to himself with his left hand, as if to say, “Who? Me? You choose me?” In the painting, Matthew is seated at a table in the shadows of the tax office in Capernaum along with others counting money. The only light in the painting comes from the direction of Christ, who in pointing to Matthew is calling him out of darkness into light.

Caravaggio’s painting, “The Calling of St. Matthew,” is part of a triptych, or three-panel painting in which the center panel, titled “The Inspiration of St. Matthew,” depicts Matthew writing the gospel that bears his name. The left and right panels depict his call to follow Jesus and his martyrdom. These three panels describe Matthew’s life as a forgiven sinner and disciple, an evangelist, and in death, as a martyr.

I mention this painting because it helps us better grasp Jesus’ words as words spoken to each of us: “*Follow me.*” Like Matthew, we each must leave our old selves behind to discover our true selves in discipleship to Jesus. We discover our true identity by journeying in faith to him.

If someone were to paint a triptych of your life, what would it include? What might be the pivotal moment, perhaps among many, when you responded to Jesus’ call? How might your life be depicted in service to Jesus and your neighbor? Faith in him leads to service for others.

Jesus’ call comes repeatedly during our lifetimes because there may be times when we lose our way, feel defeated by life, weighed down by grief, angered by injustice, or despairing in illness. Jesus is the good shepherd who searches us out, calling us back to him with the encouraging words, “*Follow me.*”

It is with good reason that today’s gospel is paired with the Romans reading about Abraham’s journey of faith. Though advanced in years, Abraham abandoned his broken hopes and past regrets to set out on a journey not knowing where God would lead him (Heb. 11:8). Like Abraham, when have you set out walking by faith? Perhaps, you became a stranger, moving because of work to a new city, state or country, trusting that God was also with you. Perhaps you locked the door on your home of many years, departing a familiar place to begin a

new life-chapter not knowing where the journey would lead. Perhaps you began treatment for illness hoping against hope that it would be effective. In the everyday of our lives, Jesus comes to us saying, “*Follow me.*” To follow him is cast all our hopes upon him, come what may in life.

I remember what it felt like to respond to Jesus’ nudging to consider setting out on a new journey of returning to my homeland that had come to feel strangely like a foreign land. I had been a missionary in Japan for 28 years across a 32-year period of my life. With fear and trembling, I resigned my tenured position at the college and seminary where I taught in Tokyo and returned to the States without new call. Yet like Abraham, I trusted that God would lead me to my next life-chapter. I stand before you today with humble gratitude for the faith of this congregation in calling one such as me to become your pastor. So I ask you: When did you give up something, perhaps at great risk, to discover that God had a new plan for your life?

This is what “*hoping against hope*” looks like. To follow and to believe in God is to believe even when our hopes have grown dim. We express this with phrases such as, “Well, we hope for the best,” which we use when we have already given up hope. “*Hoping against hope*” means resting our hope on the one who gives life to all our broken hopes and dreams.

As modern people we understand this very well. We place our hopes in many things other than God – in science and technology, in the markets and our portfolios. We place our hopes in the promises of leaders and agendas and yet, we are continually brought low by hopes unfulfilled and promises broken. Abraham knew he was near death and yet he hoped in the one who “*gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.*” Matthew, too, knew he lived in the shadows, collecting exorbitant service fees and being hated for his role in the Roman tax system. Yet in responding to a divine call, both Abraham and Matthew walked by faith with new hope into new work, new identities, and new life.

What is at stake in today’s texts is that before we “do” anything, before we do any religious programming, before we plan a worship service, before we open a soup kitchen door, before we welcome the homeless and the stranger, Jesus must first welcome each of us with grace and mercy. He calls us to cast our hopes and our entire lives upon him so that as forgiven sinners, we might also see ourselves in the outcast, the stranger, and in all whom the world calls sinful.

In first following Jesus, before trying to “help” anyone, you already know a forgiveness that overcomes your biases, hatreds, and brokenness – that overcomes *you*. Jesus words, “*Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners,*” are meant for all of us. Jesus commands us to follow him, by first going and learning mercy from him. Mercy, compassion, and forgiveness are at the center of discipleship, so that we can share mercy with others.

Yet even here we need to take care because works of mercy can quickly lose sight of faith, becoming self-justifying works and ends in themselves. Abraham and Matthew provide us

with an important lesson: Faith is not a work; but rather, faith is a response to Jesus. Faith follows Jesus wherever he might lead us in life.

Years ago, when I was working in Japan, a letter arrived bearing my father's handwriting. Inside was a note and a copy of a prayer I had written as a very small boy that he had found folded in the back of a book. Though I have no memory of writing it, in child-like handwriting the prayer reads, "Dear God, if I go as fast as a rocket or as far as the moon, I know that you will be there with me and you will love me. Amen." Though perhaps I had been captivated by the Apollo missions as a small boy, these words capture the essence of trusting that no matter where we find ourselves or where life takes us, we know that God will be there with us and love us.

Each of you are here today because you have heard Jesus' call and know his grace. You know his forgiveness and you know his welcome so that you might forgive and welcome others as he has forgiven and welcomed you.

A couple of days before his death, Martin Luther described our ultimate need of grace and forgiveness with words written on a scrap of paper: "We are all beggars. This is true." In death, the great theologian and reformer, expressed the truth that we are all outcasts, beggars, and sinners in need of grace and mercy.

So again, I ask: How might someone depict your life in a three-panel painting? How might your life of discipleship to Jesus be shown?

May Jesus' words, "*Follow me,*" cause you abandon yourself for Jesus so that you might do everything in your power for your neighbor. Amen.