

Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year A
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."
Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

I was in a hotel room sometime last year, flipping through the channels before bed, when I landed on a mini-documentary about sheepdog trials. This was literally the best thing on at the DoubleTree at 10 pm. I watched for a while and noticed that these dogs were brilliant. They could obey complicated commands from all the way across a field — wrangling sheep all over the highlands: keeping them safe, keeping them together, and herding them up and down the hills to get at the good grazing land. These dogs were little Einsteins if Einstein were mainly concerned with sheep.

I have a dog at home, and no one will ever favorably compare him to a storied astrophysicist. Captain Fantastic, our little lab mix, is a sweet dog, but I don't think he'll be entering agility contests anytime soon. Though, inadvertently, we taught him a couple of commands that weren't approved by puppy class. Because our dog has a tendency to lie down in high traffic areas, for years, I've said "Captain, scooch," while kind of moving him with my foot. After about 1,000 times, he picked up the association between "scooch" and what I need him to do. Now I just say the word, and he leaps right out of the way. When we're walking in the park and no one is around, I'll let him off his leash. But if I see someone walking toward us, or another dog nearby, I'll say, "stay close." And, over the years, it has become our version of "heel." When I say, "stay close," Captain returns to my side and hangs out until I know what we're going to do next.

We heard a pretty famous Gospel story this morning. Jesus walks along the sea and calls people right from their boats to come follow him. I've heard this story since I was a child, and I always had an image of dusty fishermen in their sandals laying down their tools to walk single file behind Jesus — almost like a game of follow the leaders.

But on this reading, I thought a little less about the word "follow," and I thought more about the idea of staying close. What would it look like to stay close to Jesus? I like this phrase because it has the literal sense of walking near someone, but it also has a figurative and imaginative sense of holding your soul close to the soul of Jesus — to stay close to Christ in a sense that defies quick or easy interpretation.

What might staying close to Jesus look like? I think we try to achieve something like this at the communion rail every week. We have the audacity to say that this bread and this wine is the very stuff of God. And then we take it into ourselves. I can't think of any way that we might be closer to Jesus than in that act. I notice many of you return to your pews after receiving the bread and the wine to kneel and pray — and I wonder if this is a tacit understanding that you have been brought close to God and that kneeling is the natural response.

I think we try to stay close to Jesus when we talk and think about ourselves, not just as a church or an affinity group but as the actual body of Christ. We are so close to Jesus in this mystical body, that our hands are the hands of Christ; our feet are the feet of Christ; our heart is the heart of Christ. Imagine your heart beating with the same rhythm as Jesus; imagine seeing the world through the eyes of God; the eyes of love.

Probably the most visible way we stay close to Jesus, or at least visible to the outside world, is when we serve the poor, the marginalized, the disenfranchised. The trick to this service is to know, deep in your body, that when you see someone in pain, someone forgotten by the world, someone who seems to have lost hope: when you see someone like that, you are seeing Jesus. If we are to follow Jesus like the disciples in today's story, we are going to have to go where Jesus is, and, my friends, Jesus has promised to be in the midst of the poor, those who mourn, and the peacemakers.

I realize that I've created an allegory where we are following Jesus the way that a dog follows its master. I'm sure this has some problems. Though, upon reflection, we could do worse — to stay the course, keeping our eyes on the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus. Though Eucharist; through community; through service to others — these are the ways that we can be faithful disciples just like the disciples on the Sea of Galilee two thousand years ago.

I would be remiss if I didn't point out someone that seems obvious from the Gospel story but perhaps merits pointing out: before the disciples made the decision to drop what they were doing and to stay close to Jesus; Jesus first came close to them. So, the way in which we choose to follow is always a response to the God who first came to us — while we were sitting there minding our own business, a nosy Jesus walks into our lives and asks us to stay close.

And we do. Maybe a little better at some times in your life, and maybe a little worse in others. But we stay close. And before you know it, as our lives and the lives of our community are transformed for the better through the presence of Christ, we can't help but tell other people about our experience. Maybe it wasn't along a sea in the ancient near east, but you have had an experience at some point where Jesus came close to you. And perhaps you're being called to share. When Jesus says that you will fish for people, He's not saying that you will tell people they should follow Jesus. He's saying that you will tell people why YOU follow Jesus. One of those won't work. One will. Tell people why you stay close to Jesus, and you will be amazed at what you find. And before you know it, these walls won't be able to handle the growth. Stay close to Jesus, my friends. Stay close. Amen.