

Pastor Roy's Sermon from January 25, 2014

A commentator (Mark Charles) I read suggests "The Jesus I met in church was always well mannered, had encouraging words to say, especially to the children. He loved his mother, obeyed his father, performed marvelous miracles, and did not do anything that might disrupt [decent and orderly folks]..."

It appears to be in our nature to see Jesus as our ideal person. Whatever we lift up as good qualities, we tend to see in Jesus. We often assume that if he were alive today he would be a good Republican, or a good Democrat. He would be a *good* Christian. And people would flock to his teaching and follow him. Did they do so in Jesus' day?

As the commentator I quoted suggests, those who don't like change or awkward situations will probably get serious indigestion when they encounter Jesus as he is in Mark. Without any warning, he overturns the lives of four men as he says, "Follow me—right now." We can't read this passage and follow this Jesus if we expect to only practice our faith during convenient hours, following our usual routines as we lead regular lives according to our plans. Following Jesus tends to be inconvenient, life changing, disruptive, and at times exasperating. Sometimes it means saying "yes," and sometimes "no." Then wondering if we have done the right thing. Or that we should have done more. Following Jesus is less about *what* we do and more *how* we *make* choices. That's why following Jesus is not an act of insanity, but of great wisdom, hope, and peace. It's about the motivation of love seeking justice and healing as we choose and move through our days.

To follow Jesus is to listen to the voice of the Spirit and follow accordingly. Whether or not it feels ok in our gut. If we always stick to what makes us feel comfortable, if we avoid that uneasy feeling at all cost, we are probably not following Jesus. We cannot tame the Spirit of Jesus.

Mark's Jesus offers no explanations or apologies. Just, "Follow me, now." He goes against the local and national assumptions, expectations, and prejudices of his day. It seems Mark is suggesting that our faith is constantly relevant. One can hardly count the number of times immediately appears in this chapter and the rest of Mark. It's always about right now. We can't rest on what we did or thought or said yesterday. It's about today. Right now.

The advantage is that yesterday can't hold us back. Yesterday is done, gone, not what determines today. Of course, we live with the realities we created yesterday, but we've got to decide right now, "Am I going to follow this Jesus? Am I going to say yes to his Grace-God?"

Am I going to accept that grace is the one thing that never changes in this world? Ever think of grace that way? Grace gives life. Grace saves. Grace allows unity with others as we give ourselves over to God and live into community. Let's face it, grace makes the plants and animals grow. Grace makes the sun shine, the rain and snow fall, allows the atmosphere to protect us from burning heat, radiation, and absolute freezing cold.

Now, one moment with Jonah. Jonah is an example of what happens when we resist grace for ourselves and others. Graceless Jonah refuses to proclaim mercy to Israel's arch enemy the Ninevites! He runs away. He eventually preaches damnation to Nineveh because he has no choice. This empire which slaughtered, exiled, and erased the identities of those who resisted them. It's no wonder he is angry when they repent. Graceless Jonah is stuck in his own bitterness. It consumes him. He will be lost unless he opens himself to the limitless possibilities of forgiveness and kindness. In the end, the wicked Ninevites are more faithful than God's prophet. They repent. And the curtain falls on a bitter man who refuses to repent. The story finishes open-ended. Will he be able to celebrate his enemy's faith? Will we be able to celebrate faith wherever *we* find it? Will we search for it beyond our own comfort zone?

Back again to Mark's Jesus who sees grace everywhere and invites us to trust in this God right now, in this moment. To put this Spirit at the center of who we are, what we do, how we listen to and treat the people around us, how we make the decisions that shape our lives and those around us.

Note, there is nothing conditional about Jesus' call to grace. It's absolute. He makes no promises or guarantees about how this following will turn out. And it is personal: *You follow me*. In time the disciples learn about the details of grace, forgiveness, and compassion.

Mark's message is from Jesus who calls us to trust, follow, learn. Now-today. Now-tomorrow. And now-the rest of my tomorrows. Mark's Jesus demands our attention--immediately.

So, let us learn from Jonah who forgot grace. Let us learn from Andrew, Peter, James and John, and Philip and Nathaniel from last week, who gladly say yes to Jesus as he invites them to follow him into the uncertain world of grace. Right now!

And may God's Spirit draw us into the struggle of grace—grace in our memories, grace today, and each new day. Always a struggle. But always worth the struggle. Each moment, each choice brings new opportunities for grace forgiveness from me, for me. The best news is that we *can* do this. Today. Now. All we need, is to make ourselves available to this Spirit of Jesus. The Spirit of forgiveness and grace—which brings healing and freedom to those who follow.

Thanks be to God who gives us courage. Amen.