



Sermons from Poland Presbyterian Church

“Beginning with Purpose”

The Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert

Ordination and Installation Sunday

June 10, 2007

Galatians 1:1-5, 11-24; Mark 1: 14-20

Let us pray:

Gracious God, open us to your presence in this place. Make us receptive to hearing you. Surprise us, by speaking to us the very word we need to hear. And then, give us, we pray, the grace to respond as your glad and faithful people. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

How delighted I am to be here with you! I have been looking forward to this Sunday for weeks, and now it is here! It seems fortuitous that my first Sunday with you should be the Sunday on which new elders and deacons are ordained and installed. --- A day of beginnings. A new season is beginning. Not just the summer and all that it holds in promise, but a new season for this church. Anticipation runs high. I know you share with me the fervent desire that this new beginning gets off to a good start --- that we make a purposeful beginning together.

Now permit a little humor: An eighty-year-old woman was told by her minister that, at her age, she should be giving some thought to what he called “the hereafter.” She said to him, “I think about it many times a day.”

“Oh, really?” said the minister. “That’s very wise.”

“It’s not a matter of wisdom,” she replied. “It’s when I open a drawer or a closet, I ask myself, “What am I here after?””

“*What am I here after?*””

“*What are we here after?*”

It’s a critical question, isn’t it? I want to look with you this morning at two words Jesus spoke that get at this question – at the purpose and meaning of our calling. – “*Follow me.*”

“Follow me.” Jesus uttered these words not once but many times: to Peter and Andrew by the Sea of Galilee; to Levi, the son of Alphaeus at the seat of customs. To a balking inquirer Jesus’ words were, “Let the dead bury their dead and come, follow me”; to the rich young ruler, “Sell what you have, give to the poor and come, follow me.” And to all in his time and in succeeding times, If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

These words of entreaty and command are plain and disconcertingly personal. They cut through a maze of theology. They are no respecter of denominational ties or ecclesiastical lines. They do not bow to rank or privilege. They are tall enough and deep enough to guide us all our lives. And I believe that, bottom-line, they offer us grace.

Why do I say this? Well, there are several considerations that have moved me in recent months to a new appreciation of these words.

First, anyone who says “Follow me” is going someplace – and we need direction.

These words strike us initially as unwelcome and intrusive. They threaten to dislocate us (as they did Paul). But ponder them longer and find that part of their appeal lies in the fact that *they promise to connect us with one who is going someplace.*

Leadership that knows where it is going is sorely in need today. Leadership, real leadership is critically important everywhere. That’s probably why “leadership books” are such hot sellers today in bookstores like Barnes and Noble and Borders. People, -- many of us – are looking for anything that can help us be better leaders...and that, probably because a lot of the time we feel ourselves at a loss. Last summer on one of the beaches up at Lake Michigan I spotted someone wearing a T-Shirt that read, “Don’t follow me, I’m lost!” That fairly sums up the way we feel sometimes – and if we feel it others probably do too.

One of our more vocal public leaders was criticized by a veteran politician who spoke his mind freely when he said: “I don’t take him seriously because I don’t think he is going anyplace.”

We need leadership today. Real leadership. We want it from others. We want to offer it ourselves. And as Christians we believe that the greatest leader of all time is Jesus Christ. And that he leads us in the way of leading.

Jesus has a plan, a work to do, a purpose to achieve in history and beyond. And he deigns to cut us in, to make us leaders with him. And that, my friends, is exciting! Don’t you think? Jesus chooses us, calls us – you and me – to get into what he’s already into, to follow where he is already going, to lead where he is already leading. Throughout the gospels we see him over and over again inviting those who would know where he was going to *“Come, and see.”* And there is no greater grace I know of – nothing more exciting I know of – than to do just that ---

to be led in a venture that is higher and wider and deeper than ourselves.....It often means we are taken places, into avenues of service and mission we'd never have entertained/imagined for ourselves otherwise.

Seventeen years ago when I started pastoral ministry I never would have dreamed I'd be serving congregations in Utah, in Michigan and Ohio. I was from the West Coast, but God led me to these places. Many of you who have been ordained as elders and deacons years back never imagined that you would be serving on the church's Session or its Board of Deacons one day; but the tap on the shoulder came and you answered.

So that's one thing. He who calls us, -- He who says, "Follow me" --- is going someplace. He has a plan for you and me. And in following we are taken places, discover new things about life and about ourselves -- and that in itself is grace.

But consider another thing -- that **anyone who calls us -- who says "Follow me" -- is obviously more interested in the future than the past -- and we need a loyalty to the future.** We don't want to minimize the past of course. But still, with Jesus it's not *where you've been* that matters, but *where you're going*; not whether you have fallen, but whether you will get up; not whom you've hurt in the past, but whom you will help in the future.

It is important for all elders and deacons and pastors, -- indeed all of us -- to remember this. To not let ourselves become held captive by our pasts, and let God lead us forward.

There's an approach to psychiatry that has been around a number of years under the name "Reality Therapy." Its founding mentor was William Glasser. The approach makes sense to me. Reality therapists insist that it is futile to keep on rummaging around in a person's past, getting people to articulate and amplify yesterday's failures and to recall how the world has mistreated them. The important thing is to get them -- to get us-- to face our needs and prepare for a future worth living.

Isn't that how it is with Jesus? Fan through the pages of the gospel record and you see how little time Jesus spent allowing people to expand on a burdened past. When the woman taken in adultery was thrust into his presence he didn't try to explore the circumstances that had pushed her to her fall. He simply took her by the hand and said, "Go your way and sin no more" (John 8:11). When Nicodemus came to him under the cover of night, shackled by an impossible legalism, Jesus didn't ask him how he got that way but said simply, "You must be born again" (John 3:3).

Our Lord doesn't give up on you, on me, on any of us just because we fail, just because we fall; in fact, our failings, our fallings become in his sovereign design part of the way he calls us forward into the future for service. And that too is certainly grace.

Finally, let us consider the fact that He who commands us to follow, in so commanding, has given us a norm by which to test our living....a “star by which to steer.” And that also is grace.

Each of us has times when we ask ourselves, “Should I have taken this option? What if I had done differently?” Choices have to be made, many clouded by uncertainty and confusion. The solution lies not in dogged self-reliance --- (“I can master this situation”) --- or in resignation --- (“Somehow I’ll muddle through”), --- but in the conviction that we are called, --- called in the first place not to be a salesperson or a surgeon or a soldier or an elder or a deacon or a pastor, but to be a Christian. His call to us, his word to us – “Follow me” --- ought to monitor what we do and say and think as trustees, deacons, elders, committee members, session members, and as a congregation. Is this action, this decision, this policy, this attitude of such a quality that it is moving us in the direction Jesus is going? We may not always agree on what it means to follow Jesus, but we cannot question the fundamental presumption that we are here to follow Jesus. It’s *what we are here for; what we’re here after*. --- The acid test stripped of its theological décor.

A few days after John F. Kennedy was assassinated a member of a Presbyterian church in Ann Arbor suggested that the one thing the congregation might do to partially redeem the tragedy would be to provide Marina Oswald with an opportunity to improve her English. Mrs. Oswald had expressed a desire to stay in the U.S. and learn its language better.

To make a long story short, in due time and in cooperation with federal authorities and others, Marina Oswald came to Ann Arbor. She slipped into the community at night by train while a battery of reporters were waiting hawkishly at the airport. She lived with a modest family that took seriously its devotion to God and its love for people.

And then the mail began to come in. There were some who were quick and hot to say that what the church did was unpatriotic. Others told them that their action was unwise, still others that it was unfair. (One woman said that she had belonged to a church for forty years and what it had done for her in all that time she could write on the back of a postage stamp.) Others were prompted to say that what the church did was grossly un-American.

The pastor answered every letter, rightly or wrongly feeling it the obligation of his ministry to do so. He said in effect to each person who criticized, “The one thing you haven’t shown is that what we have done is unlike Christ.”

It doesn’t really matter whether an action is profitable or popular, whether it is practical or realistic, whether it wins a salute from a city or nation. What matters only and always is whether it can be understood as following Jesus Christ.

“Follow me.”

To follow Jesus is to have a plan.

To follow Jesus is to face and embrace the future.

To follow Jesus is to have a star by which to steer.

Every time he comes across our way and bids us follow, he creates a crisis. And we can never be the same again. For when his command registers on our souls, we can choose to die to God and live to self, or to die to self and live to God. But it is in choosing the second that we experience grace.

Closing Prayer

O God, if we follow at a distance or not at all;
If we follow from a sense of duty devoid of passion;
If we follow only when it is convenient;
Speak to us in commanding love,
And help us to become what we were meant to be.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.