

Following God | 1 Cor 1:10-18; Mathew 4:12-23 | LUMC | January 22, 2023
By Rev Grace Kanake

Dear Church family and friends: last week we encountered God doing a new thing in our lives and in the life of the United Methodist Church. This week God wants us to reciprocate the acts of his gracious love—God in saving us. We can respond by following God wherever he leads us. God wants us to unequivocally follow him without reservations. We emulate the first disciples who not only left their fishing profession, but for some, their families, and parents, to follow Jesus. We learn new faith, and practice it in and out of season.

We learned last week that the early Christians did not follow Christ blindly. They questioned John the Baptist about Jesus and his ministry. They wanted to know what the difference was between what John and Jesus were preaching. John, without hesitation said he was only a forerunner, one who was preparing the way for Jesus. Describing Jesus' divinity, John said, "I cannot even perform a servanthood role to untie his shoes."

John was drawing a clear and distinct boundary. Two of John's disciples decided to check Jesus out: they met him for a casual talk. To assess if they would receive better spiritual service, they asked Jesus where he was staying. Jesus invited them saying, "come and see". They stayed with Jesus for a day learning new ways of being practical Christians. They heard Jesus preaching and witnessed him healing the sick; they knew they were in the right place!

After a while, enemies of John, including king Herod, chased him and put him in prison to murder him to stop the ministry of repentance, and this put a chill on Jesus' ministry. How daring and difficult humans can be. From ancient times people continue to overwhelmingly lean toward evildoing. People's priorities to disregard the truth and engage freely in evils is glaring and alarming. For our information, John did not break any law. Asking people to repent of their evils, to live justly, or to look out for the welfare of others was not breaking the law, even though that led to his death.

To chase John and murder him unsettled Jesus, and provoked him to move north, closer to king Herod's territory, to send a message that killing John was an indirect rejection of Jesus and his ministry. Jesus' moving north of Galilee near the gentiles' territory was also to open up his ministry to the gentiles and call them into his reign.

Jesus' reign is near, and all those willing to participate should have moral renewal.

The first people who responded to Jesus' call to serve were professional fishermen. They had families, and some participated in their family's fishing business. Jesus called them to be "fishers of humanity". They readily accepted the call and left behind their families and their successful fishing careers. They made a conscious decision to follow Christ physically, doing what Jesus did, and imitating his character.

They lived their faith by power of example; they were patient, enduring any and all misgivings, discomforts, and inconveniences from within or without.

In those times mission was done on foot. There were no bikes, cars, or airplanes. Only the rich people and military men would afford a mule cart or chariots. The disciples travelled from village to village either two by two or in a larger team because of bandits, wild animals, or rejection by aggressive villagers. The disciples were not rich. Their welfare depended on the people they preached to; they were given food and accommodations.

When Jesus calls one to follow him, he equips those who accept the call and goes with them in the mission field. This promise is affirmed by St Mathew, who quoted Jesus saying, “I will be with you always, until the end of time”¹. The early followers of Jesus Christ thoroughly trained for three years. The disciples were human beings and some of them were susceptible to human weakness, including the desire to steal, arguing over who would inherit Jesus’ leadership when he was gone, and pretty gossiping. Jesus cautioned them about these human evils, often rebuking them to align their faith with his moral standards. The Christian’s greatest difference from most modern people is their ability to quickly repent and renew their vow to be faithful to their leader—Jesus Christ.

The early church followers’ spiritual life was self-explanatory. They enjoyed a cohesive fellowship, they banded together, they responded to criticism, and they worked to overcome any misgivings arising from both internal or external pressures. We have the church today because the early Christians overcame temptations. They evangelized the ancient world, and the Gospel eventually reached our country. When the Gospel spread beyond Jewish territory, the disciples learned different cultures and customs, including new languages. St Paul narrates some of the difficulties the early church in the Greek city of Corinth encountered.

St Paul was the second generation of the early Christians, a missionary whose writing continues to strengthen the Christian community. As St Paul narrates, the Corinthian church was riddled with divisions concerning the message they received from their past and present missionaries among them (in today’s vernacular, their pastor). St Paul, St Peter, and Apollos, all ministered this church at different times. As a result, the Corinthian church was divided into four groups for a long time: one group recognized St Paul as their pastor; another group followed St Peter; another group accepted Apollos as their pastor; and the last group belonged to Jesus to the exclusion of the others. Each group compared their pastor’s wisdom and eloquence to the pastor of the other group.

Let us not forget the cultural background of the members of this church. Most were Greeks and their culture loved human wisdom. They revered their philosophers, and that cultural mindset was now splintering the church. Every pastor was viewed in that context. These members were trying to intellectualize the Gospel message to

¹ Mathew 28:16-18

make it more acceptable in their community. Each team was making their leader intellectually and eloquently better than the other teams' leaders. They forgot that God's wisdom is far greater than human wisdom.

Finally, Chloe's family (God bless their souls) had enough of this indirect cold fighting; they informed St Paul at the risk of being chastised. This family was unhappy with clandestine meetings that were designed to hurt each other. They were tired of the gossips. And their brave maneuver saved the church from collapsing.

St Paul rebuked the teams' allegations and disapproved their secretly held convictions built on human ability. He pointed them to the cross. These members were baptized into Christ, not in their pastor's name. They needed to overcome human desires and look to Christ for salvation. I believe that their pastors had no intentions of causing divisions because St Paul was with Apollos when Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthian church. Apollos was unhappy that some Christians were professing allegiance to his name rather than believing in Jesus Christ. The divisions in the church caused by the human inclination to play God blocked the call to follow Jesus Christ and thus, growth of the ministry. Paul encouraged the members to promote spiritual unity, not human aptitudes. We can say a big shout-out to Chloe's family for their courage to expose the infighting, and Paul's response of pointing the church to Christ and asking members to avoid human praises.

What lessons are we to learn from Jesus and St Paul today? I can speak for myself, and you can as well decide your take from the lesson. In my case the first thing that attracted me into following Jesus through the Methodist Church was very inclusive preaching. There were orphans in the church, old people, young people, rich and poor. Other people were civil servants and the community leaders. All of us were treated the same and offered the services equally. I did not see a place in the church reserved for certain categories of people. I did not see special tables during church functions, not even for the pastor. We all mingled, received food, and participated in self-service. Despite some people trying to favor human values over and against church teachings, the mutuality and inclusion is a hallmark of the Methodist family

St Paul's and Jesus' narratives today remind me of my Christian call to follow Christ faithfully, and to serve God in various ways to advance the reign of Christ. Chloe's family challenges me to honestly stand against groups geared toward human praise, and expose indirect competitions that block the mission of Christ. When I received the pastoral call, God put a burden on me to do and continue the ministry of Christ despite the cost. Being a Christian calls me to remember that ministry is not mine; it belongs to Christ, and it must be Christ-centered.

Friends, following Christ is counter-cultural. It started with Jesus defying his own culture and society, taking his ministry to the gentile world, and finally to you and me. Christ's teaching must influence my cultural context and allow Christ to change me into the Christian I can be. I am aware always to align my desires with God's teachings. The human desire to take the praise that is God's alone and align with other human

beings instead of God first, is a recipe for chaos. The only soap to wash the blemish out is repentance and allowing Christ the first place in our life.

To follow Christ is costly, but the disciples taught us how to do it despite the cost. The early Christians did it and we are byproducts of their faithful following. I am indebted to them and will stay restless until my soul finds rest in God.

May we take the call's challenge and follow Christ, bearing spiritual fruits. May our mission work be to the praise of God. May we emulate the disciples: despite their finitude, they were in one accord. They listened at the feet of Jesus and practiced what they learned.

Amen