Sunday, January 24, 1999
FOLLOW WHO?
Matthew 4:12-23

A young rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers while the other half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did helped to solve the impasse.

Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's 99-year-old founder. He met the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles. "So tell me," he pleaded, "was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Ah," said the younger man, "then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"But," responded the young rabbi, "what we have is complete chaos. Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream."

"Ah," said the old rabbi, "that was the tradition."

Wherever people gather together, factions develop in their midst. Some want to follow one tradition or leader, while others want to follow another. Jesus discovered this with his closest followers. Sometimes they tried to talk him out of his decisions. They argued about who was the greatest. One of them betrayed him, and many deserted him when the going got tough. Though they had all agreed to follow Jesus, sometimes they failed.

The Apostle Paul encountered this problem when he organized new congregations. The congregation in Corinth, for example, argued about whom to follow. Some said they followed Paul, others said they followed Apollos, and still others said they followed Peter. Paul struggled to get them to work together.

The story this morning from Matthew's gospel is about Jesus' invitation to his first disciples. However, it only tells of those who accepted that invitation. There are other stories in the gospels where people turned down his invitation. For example, there was the rich young man who asked about finding God's purpose for his life, and Jesus told him to sell all he had, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow him. According to the Bible story, that young man went away sorrowful because he had many possessions.

Who do you follow in your life? What guides you when there are decisions and choices to be made? Yogi Berra's solution was simple. He said, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it!"

This sermon is about accepting the invitation to follow Jesus. One of the best ways to define following Jesus is to say that it means discovering what God's purpose is for your life and using Jesus' teachings, ethical principles, and way of treating people as guidelines for fulfilling that purpose.

We human beings have sought to discover the purpose of life for a very long time. One of the classic questions in one of the historic catechisms is: “What is the chief end of human beings?” In other words, for what purpose did God create you and me? The answer in this catechism is: “To glorify God and enjoy God forever.”

That’s a good overall general answer, but each one of us has to make it more specific. With God’s guidance, each person needs to discover his or her own distinct purpose and path. I believe that as you discover God’s distinct purpose and path for your life, you are accepting the invitation of Jesus to follow him.

But how do you discover your life’s purpose? There is no one way that works for everyone, but there are some general principles to guide us.

The first principle is this: As you make choices and decisions along the way, ask yourself some or all of these questions:

- Who am I following? Is it the kind of person I want as a role model? Can I trust his or her leadership?
- Am I following my best dreams, or am I only pursuing some selfish ambition?
- Am I making this decision primarily because someone else wants me to follow that path, or is it also something I truly want to do deep down?
- Will following this path use the gifts and talents that God has given me?
- Am I taking the easy way out? Am I afraid of change or of taking a risk?
- Am I motivated by greed or the desire for personal power?
- Is this an emotional decision based on my feelings of the moment, or does it also make sense rationally?

The second principle in discovering your life’s purpose is this: As you travel your life’s journey, you will be presented with numerous lessons that you will need to learn in order to fulfill your purpose. Pay attention to those lessons.

For example, when you experience pain, you learn a lesson. When you feel joy, you learn a different lesson. When you face disappointment or failure, you learn another lesson. When you achieve success, you also learn a lesson. For every action or event, there is an accompanying lesson to be learned.

As you journey, you will encounter challenging lessons that others don’t have to face, while others spend years struggling with challenges you don’t need to deal with. You may never know why you are blessed with a wonderful marriage while your friends suffer through bitter arguments and painful divorces. In the same way, you cannot be sure why you struggle financially while your peers enjoy abundance. You might have a job you don’t like right now. Until you can do something different, ask: What can I learn from this experience that will help me on my life’s journey?

Remember, the only thing you can be sure of is that you will be presented with all the lessons you specifically need to learn. Whether you choose to learn them is entirely up to you.

The challenge of this principle is to align yourself with your own unique path by learning your individual lessons. This can be one of the most difficult issues you will face because sometimes your path will lead you into a life that is radically different from others.

Don't make the mistake of comparing your path or your lessons to those of the people around you. Instead, focus on discovering the lessons meant for you.

If you can meet this challenge, you are on the way to discovering the mystery of God's purpose for your life and actually living it. You cease being a victim of fate or circumstances and become empowered — life no longer just "happens" to you.

When you are working toward uncovering and fulfilling your true purpose, you will discover astonishing gifts within yourself that you may have never known you possessed.

Here's one important suggestion to help you learn the most from the lessons along your journey: To learn, you have to be open and receptive. None of the lessons life presents to you will be useful unless you recognize them and are open to their inherent value. These lessons will show up every day, and as difficult as some of them may be, you need to change your perception and see them as gifts or guides along your path.

It is remarkable to see the profound transformation that comes to individuals when they understand that every event in their lives occurs to teach them something about themselves.

When you accept the lessons that life brings you, no matter how unpleasant or challenging they may be, you take the crucial first step toward finding your true self and your purpose. You are also taking the first step in following Jesus.

It is easy to recognize lessons that come in attractive packages, like a big promotion at work or becoming a parent for the first time. These teach the lessons of responsibility, patience, and discipline. Being open to these lessons isn't so hard.

More difficult to recognize are the lessons that make it seem as though you are getting a raw deal from life. These lessons are wrapped in less attractive packages and tend to cause resistance.

For example, losing your job may look like a catastrophe rather than an opportunity to learn the lessons of forgiveness or flexibility. Experiencing heartbreak can look like a crisis rather than a hint to learn the lessons of kindness or detachment. While the less attractive lessons may not be fun, they can actually be the biggest gifts you receive.

So with every lesson that presents itself along your journey, ask: Am I following openness or resistance? You can either continue to follow resistance and feel bad, or you can follow openness and learn whatever the lesson is there to teach you.

A good question to ask yourself as you seek to find your life's purpose is: What lessons am I resisting?

The third principle to remember in discovering God's purpose for your life is that this purpose can change direction or take detours along the way. We can find ourselves on a road we hadn't planned on taking at all.

When Jesus invited Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow him, it was something they had not planned. Until then, they saw their life's purpose as fishermen — a worthy occupation.

Once they accepted Jesus' invitation, their lives went in a completely different direction. These four men never dreamed that they would one day be leaders in a new religious movement that changed the world.

Last Monday, we honored the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. His life's purpose changed directions several times, and he found himself doing things he had never anticipated as he continued to accept the invitation to follow Jesus.

In 1954, King was called to be the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in downtown Montgomery, Alabama. At that point, he had no idea that he would be remembered as he is today. He understood God's purpose for him as being a faithful pastor, but it turned out to be much more than that.

In Montgomery, public transportation buses were segregated. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man. Other people had been arrested before for similar reasons, but Rosa Parks was willing to see the issue through.

Later that evening, the black leaders in Montgomery met at the home of Rosa Parks and her husband. They told her that this was the case they had been looking for, and that was the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott.

The next step was to organize a city-wide meeting of black citizens, and they called on numerous black ministers in Montgomery to help. When E.D. Nixon, the local leader, called on Martin Luther King, Jr. for help, he accepted, and they held the first big meeting at his church.

A few days later, the leaders asked King to be the president of the new association they were organizing, and again, he accepted.

Because of the success of the bus boycott under King's leadership, one year later, after 381 days of walking and carpooling, the buses in Montgomery were peacefully integrated — on December 21, 1956.

Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. were like those first disciples who answered Jesus' call to follow him. They had no idea how God would use them to fulfill both God's purpose and their own individual purposes. They had no idea of the detours that lay ahead of them on their life's journey.

What was true of these people can be true of each one of us.

You can follow Jesus and fulfill God's purpose for your life in so many different ways. It could be in a quiet, almost anonymous way without any fame. It might be doing your job faithfully where you are day after day. It could be staying home and nurturing your children, working in an office or factory, or teaching school. The answer to Jesus' invitation to "follow him" can be fulfilled in many different ways.

The important thing is to remain open to continually discovering God's purpose in your life and to always ask, "Who am I following?" Amen.