Book 36

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 and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did moved toward solving 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 the midst of them. Some want to follow one tradition or leader and others want to follow another leader or tradition. Jesus discovered this with his closest followers. Sometimes they tried to talk him out of his decisons. They argued about who was the greatest. One of them betrayed him and many of them deserted him when the going got tough. They had all agreed to follow Jesus but sometimes they failed.

The Apostle Paul had 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 is only about those who accepted that invitation. There are other stories in the gospels where people turned down his invitation when it was given. For example, there was the rich young man who asked about finding God's purpose for him in 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."

So this sermon is about accepting the invitation to follow Jesus. I believe that one of the best ways to define following Jesus is to say that following him means to discover what God's purpose is for you in your life and then to use his teachings, his ethical principles and his way of treating people as the guidelines for your life as you fulfill God's purpose for your life.

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 in each one of our lives we have 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: Ask yourself as you make choices and decisions along the way, some or all of these questions. Who am I following? Is it the kind of person I want for 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 deep down want to do? Will following this path use the gifts and talents which God has given me?

In making this choice or decision am I taking the

easy way out? Am I afraid of change or of taking a risk?

Am I being primarily motivated by greed or the desire for personal power?

Is it only 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 know disappointment or failure you learn a lesson. When you have success you also learn a lesson.

For every action or event there is an accompanying lesson to be learned.

As you travel on your journey you will encounter challenging lessons that others don't have to face, while others spend years struggling with challenges that 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 now that you don't like. Until you can do something different the question

to ask is: what can I learn from this experience that will help me in my life's journey.

Remember the only thing you can be sure of is that you will be presented with all the lessons that you specifically need to learn; whether you choose to learn them or not 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 be faced with in your lifetime 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 and focusing on the disparity between their

lessons and yours.

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

Furthermore 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 very important suggestion to help you in learning the most from the lessons along your journey. To learn you have to be open and receptive. None of the lessons that life presents

you will be useful unless you recognize them and are open to their inherent value. These lessons will show up every day of your life and as difficult as some of them may be you need to change your perception and come to 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 spot those lessons that you perceive as opportunities because they are usually attractive. Getting a big promotion at work does present certain lessons, such as responsibility and willingness. Becoming a parent for the first time teaches the lessons of patience and discipline. These lessons are more easily recognized because they come wrapped in attractive packages. 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 most people to put up resistance.

For example, when you are not open to seeing your lessons, losing your job looks like a catas-

trophe 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 unattachment. 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 to us along your journey you need to ask, am I following openness or resistance? You have a choice, you can either continue to follow resistance and feel badly or you can follow openness and learn whatever the lesson is there to teach you.

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

The third principle you need remember in discovering God's purpose for your life is that that 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. Heretofore they saw their life's purpose as fishermen--a worthy occupation.

Once they accepted the invitation of Jesus, their lives went in a totally different direction. These four men in their wildest imaginations 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'd never anticipated as he continued to accept the invitation to follow Jesus.

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

In Montgomery public transportation buses were segregated as in many other cities. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for not being willing to give up her seat to a white man. Other people had been arrested before that for

refusing to give up their seat to a white person, but Rosa Parks was willing to see the issue through.

Later that evening, the black leaders in Montgomery met together at the home of Rosa Parks and her husband and told her this was the case they'd 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 people and they called on the numerous black ministers in Montgomery to help them do that. When Ed Nixon the local leader called Martin Luther King, Jr. for his help he accepted and they had the first big meeting at his church.

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

Because of the success of the bus boycott under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., one year later, after 381 days of walking and car-pooling, the buses in Montgomery, Alabama were peacefully integrated--December 21, 1956.

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

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

You can be following Jesus and fulfilling 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 or working in an office or a factory, or teaching school. The answer to Jesus' invitation to "follow him" can be fulfilled in many different ways.

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