

“Follow the Love”

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The Lamb of God (John 1:29-42)

The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, “After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.” I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.’ And John testified, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.’ The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter).

Our culture is obsessed with following and having followers. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Snap Chat — they all track followers and encourage us to compare the number of likes and follows we have compared with others.

We follow people for all sorts of reasons: they are entertaining, offer useful advice, or maybe they’re just weird enough that we can’t help but be interested!

I remember almost a year ago now when the Trucker Convoy was going on in Ottawa I followed it through the media, but also I would go on TikTok and watch a live feed of any number of the protesters who were recording and using social media as a platform. It was fascinating. Live-streaming has really changed the way we take in events happening all over the world in real time. The news gives you one story — and usually a helpful birds-eye view of what is going on — but a guy standing next to his truck ranting about government and why he’s driven across the country and is camped out gives you another perspective. Neither is really the whole story. I didn’t sympathize with the protesters; I probably mostly worried about my daughter who was living and working right in the middle of it all. But like a bug drawn to the light, I couldn’t help but want to listen in through social media to some of the characters and try to understand what this was all about.

Of course, something entertaining or weird will draw you there, but unless there’s something deeper that you are interested in. you probably won’t stay

watching or following for long.

Long before social media, John the Baptist had many followers. Somehow his weirdness — he was a pretty odd guy wearing weird clothes and eating a very eco-friendly diet of honey and locusts — his weirdness combined with a timeliness and his message drew people to him. People were tired of the status quo. They were under occupation from the Romans who taxed them pretty heavily, plus their own religious leaders imposed a tax and a lot of rules on how people were to live. It was a hard life. So this mix of weird and need all came together to make John the Baptist hugely successful.

And then the day comes. Jesus walks on the scene.

John has been expecting this, but is still a little taken aback when Jesus insists on being baptized by John. And as he does, John knows for sure this is the One he has been waiting for; the One he has been preparing people for. He doesn't hesitate for a moment to turn his full attention to Jesus and call out "Look! The lamb of God!" John's followers can't help but turn and look and be interested themselves. They can't help but want to follow Jesus instead of John.

Andrew is one of them. He was in the crowd. Actually Andrew wasn't just in the crowd — he was all in. He was a disciple of John. So when John says "Look!" he goes to look and find out more. Andrew asks Jesus where he staying so he can find him again. But instead of giving him his contact information or handing out his business card or Linked-in profile info, Jesus says: "Come and see."

I wonder ... if we were to stop people on King St. and ask what it might mean to be a follower of Jesus, I imagine many might talk about the do's and don't's. Maybe the 10 Commandments as being a Christian for many looks like following the rules. *But Jesus doesn't give a list of rules.* He doesn't even give an elevator speech or give his platform for the coming three years in the office of Messiah. He simply turns to Andrew and says: "Come and see," and then Jesus turns and starts to walk away.

Following Jesus for Andrew literally looks like catching up to this guy who was walking somewhere.

As Jesus goes on his way with some new followers in tow, Andrew naturally starts to find more followers. He goes and gets his brother and says: "We have found the Messiah!" And Peter comes to see the person that Andrew has given his full attention to.

At this point they are curious, maybe even still a little suspicious. They are not yet committed. It's a bit like between steps 2 and 3 in AA. Step 2 is "*Came to believe that a Power Greater than myself could restore me to sanity.*" I like the words "came to believe" because it suggests movement. It suggests "I'm not quite there yet, but I'm coming to believe. This one looks like a good route, but there are others." With Step 3: "*Made a decision to turn our will over to the*

care of God as you understand God” you have enough information to make a decision to follow. You still have to make the journey but you have seen, felt, and experienced enough to say “I’m in. This is the route I am going to take. I’m willing to make an investment.”

At this point, following moves from curiosity to commitment, and with commitment comes a cost. It might be a small cost. Andrew had to stop following John to follow Jesus. In the other gospels they drop their nets — they stop fishing in order to follow. There’s a cost at that point. And, of course, as they follow the cost continues — it totally changes their lives. As disciples of Jesus they end up facing persecution, but still they follow. Why? Because the benefit was greater than the cost.

This past week a book was released that I contributed to called “*Following Jesus Today*”. It’s a lovely little book, if I do say so myself. Edited by Rob Fennell, it’s a compilation of stories from 17 different Christians, mostly in the United Church, about what it means to them to follow Jesus today.

One of the stories was written by Frank Emanuel. Frank served as a pastor in a Vineyard church. Vineyard is a denomination and I love his description of it. He says: “*Imagine if Quakers and Pentecostals had a hippie lovechild!*” He shares how his church had a lot of slogans. One was “*Risk everything for the Kingdom of God*” and another one that he loved was “*Love, like water, always flows to the lowest place.*” And he explains that to him this meant that the love of God has a tendency to go where it is needed most, and that as followers of Jesus, we are called to follow that love no matter where it leads, even if it leads to unexpected or difficult places.

Indeed, that’s what happened to him. As he was pastoring a Vineyard church in Ottawa, one of his key church leaders arranged a meeting with him and told him that she had fallen in love with another woman. This took place in the early 2000’s. Vineyard is a more evangelical and conservative leaning church and so his wondering about how to respond to this was not easy or instant. He cared about this church leader and he knew that she had come and shared with a great deal of fear of what the outcome would be. He also knew that many queer people had been very hurt by the church. Those two slogans about what it looks like to follow Jesus helped him to respond: “*Risk everything for the Kingdom of God*” and “*Love, like water, always flows to the lowest place.*” (Where it is needed most.)

So he decided to follow the love. This meant continuing to love and accept her and now her new partner. At first it wasn’t so hard because it was a small church where everyone knew each other, and under his leadership there was acceptance. Several years later when the couple asked him to marry them, following Jesus and following the love became more difficult. It wasn’t difficult to *marry* them. He describes the service as filled with the Holy Spirit and with love and joy. He had already decided this was the way he was called to follow Jesus, where love flows to the place it’s needed most, so marrying them was

not a big debate in his mind. But he knew there would be a cost. When others in the denomination found out about it, it created a huge controversy that ended with his church being disbanded and eventually him realizing he would never be given a leadership position in the denomination again. Still, he followed Jesus. He says he didn't set out to be an activist or an advocate for LGBTQ — he set out to follow Jesus. And it was following Jesus that led him to that place where the love needed most to go.

I don't know him, but he's in Ottawa, so I'll have to try to look him up.

People start to follow Jesus for all kinds of reasons. Maybe they grew up in the church, or maybe someone invites them to a Christian activity. Often it's because someone they admire points to Jesus. I want to ask you— those of you who are committed followers of Jesus— *in what way are you or is your life pointing to Jesus?* Sometimes it's through our actions. I think increasingly we need to use our words alongside our actions. As Peter says: *"In your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."* (1 Peter 3:15)

That's hard sometimes. It can be hard to put into words something that is alive and burns inside us.

Those who are cautiously curious; keep following. Keep going down the road. It's not an easy road, but in a world that lacks depth and meaning, I guarantee there is something real here.

For those who are on the road and have realized it's hard sometimes, I offer the following. There are the ideals of the faith and words like love, but when the love hits the road there can be a lot of mud and rocks and giant barricades tempting you to give up and find an easier path. Actually I mention big rocks but often it's the pebbles in our shoe that do us in. It's when someone who is in the church says or does something hurtful or petty or offensive and we are like "That's it, I'm outta here!". Often it's the little things that bother us most. I get that. I pray courage for you. I pray that you keep following the love. I pray that you keep pointing to the love.

Do you have any idea how much the world needs real love right now?

The Lamb of God is here, walking ahead of us, out of the church onto the street where a homeless person sits, out into the retirement home where people are again isolated in their rooms because of an outbreak, into an apartment where someone lives alone and is so very afraid, over to the toboggan hill where kids are having a blast. Go follow that love. Where Jesus leads you will be different from where Jesus leads me, but it will look like following love.

Why do it? Because that love will fill you with a joy like nothing else in the world or in the universe ever could or ever will.