

Follow and Turn
3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time
Ordination Sunday
January 26, 2020
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

[Matthew 4:12,17-23](#)
[I Corinthians 1:10-18](#)

This morning, we are blessed to ordain new elders of the church – to publicly acknowledge the call from God that has led these three women to become servant leaders of Trinity Presbyterian Church. The Church has a long history of calling ordinary people to use their God-given gifts in new ways, to build up the community of Christ’s disciples – a history so long, in fact, that it goes back to Jesus, and perhaps even further, to the time of the Judges of the tribes of Israel. In one of the more well-known Gospel stories, Jesus began his ministry in the region of Galilee, calling directly to two sets of brothers, who were fishing in the lake. “Come and follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of people.” And immediately, they dropped their nets, and followed Jesus.

What do we know about these people that Jesus called? We know that Jesus had been preaching, at least for a very short while, that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand – and that Jesus was repeating the message that John the Baptist began, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the Kingdom of Heaven!” Peter, Andrew, James and John – when they “immediately follow” Jesus, they are not only following, they are also literally changing their lives, just as Jesus had been telling people to do. But, Jesus tells them, their talents are still well founded – they don’t stop being fishers, they just learn to fish for people. You are already enough, Jesus tells them – all it takes is a different focus – and the help of Jesus himself, who will make them into fishers of people.

Now, in English, when we say, “I will make you do something” – generally, that’s not a good thing. It’s a threat. “I’ll make you eat those words.” “I’ll make you lick my boots.” “Who’s gonna make me do something I don’t wanna do?” and so on.

There's a reason that most modern translations choose to render this sentence like we heard it this morning: "I'll *show you* how to fish for people." It sounds much nicer, much less like a threat, and more like the intent of the Greek, which is to build up, to create by hand a unique item. To make artisanally, we might say. Jesus isn't saying, "Follow me, and I'll *MAKE YOU* do something you don't wanna do..." He's saying, "Follow me, and I'll help shape you into something you never knew you could do with the skills you already have!" You thought you were a catcher of fish – now, let's work to make you a uniquely gifted, artisanal catcher of people. And unlike when you cast your nets for fish, taking them from their home to a place of sorrow, you'll be taking people from a place of sorrow and helping them be home. As Debie Thomas writes in an article on Journey With Jesus, "When Jesus called these tried-and-true fishermen to follow him, they understood the call not as a directive to leave their experience and intelligence behind, but to bring the best of their core selves forward – to become even more fully and freely themselves."¹

That's what Christian leadership is supposed to be like – artisanal followers of Jesus, using unique gifts in new ways to the betterment of the world. Yet, it's not often what we think of. For many churches and Christian organizations, it's almost expected that you have to fit a certain image, or be pressed into a standard mold in order to follow Jesus. When I started looking at seminaries, to see if I might one day want to attend, I know I tried to force myself into a "standard Christian mold." At my very first tour of a seminary campus, I felt awkward and out of place. Surely people could see that I'd only recently returned the church? I needed to be 110% Christian stereotype. So, I greeted everyone I met that first day by saying "Peace be with you." I tried telling awkward jokes, like "how many Presbyterians does it take to change a lightbulb? None, because the light works and fails at preordained times, according to the will of God." And then, at the chapel service we attended, one of the speakers reminded us that God loves us all, from our body to our very core, and that returning to God means being your most authentic self, your most full and beloved

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2507-i-will-make-you>

self, rather than some mask you put on around others. That, yes, change is hard – but that the change that God calls us to is the change of a flower that blossoms in the light, and ultimately, it's what we are meant to be.

This idea, of being flowers blossoming under the light of God, revealing our inmost core – well, it stuck with me. I stopped trying to be different, and started being myself – my geeky love of science fiction and fantasy, my love of language and the origins of words, and my love of learning new things, from woodworking to painting – and I found that I liked blossoming in God's light. There is joy in following Jesus, in turning and changing along the path that God intended – the path where you are most yourself, because you are reflecting God's light to the world through the gifts that you have been given.

You see, my friends, when we gather together in a place like this, and worship God together – it's like presenting God with a bunch of flowers, a bouquet that is unlike any other. Yet, while God's face shines upon us, it's easy for us to be scrunched in, not looking up or noticing. The Christian leaders among us – the elders, the teachers, the deacons, and yes, even the pastors – their task is to help each other see themselves as God sees them. A gentle nudge, a hug that turns even just a fraction closer to God. A reminder that your uniqueness, your love, your gifts matter. You are valued. Loved. And connected to a bunch of flowers basking in the same light you are.

And that's easy to forget – that each of us need each other and God. In the early church, in one of Paul's first letters to a congregation he visited in Corinth, we see polarizing factionalism taking place. Sadly, we don't have the letter to Paul that he's responding to, but in his reply, he describes a situation where people in the church are organizing behind specific people – Apollos, Cephas, Christ, and yes, even Paul himself. Paul's response is a bit scathing – you can feel his sarcasm as he claps back, “Has Christ been divided? Was *Paul* crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of *Paul*?” In the same letter, Paul decries a practice of the Corinthian church, that the wealthy eat full meals at the communion table, and cups overflowing with wine, while the poor only get a scrap of bread. Clearly, this

bunch of flowers hadn't figured out quite how to blossom together in God's light.

But whenever God's light shines, there's hope that the flowers will blossom. Paul uses his persuasive gifts to encourage the people of Corinth, "Agree with each other and don't be divided into rival groups. Instead, be restored with the same mind and the same purpose, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." This rings as strongly, as truly today as it did two thousand years ago. When we turn our backs to each other, we turn away from the light. We must follow Christ, and turn to the light of God – blossoming into our true selves, and leading others to do the same. For if this church is a bouquet of flowers, then the world is filled with beautiful bouquets – all blossoming under the same light of God, no matter how different the flowers are from one another. If we can see the light shining on others, we can give up our rivalries and be restored into the same mind and purpose, of Jesus Christ.

May you follow Christ in the path of authenticity. May the Spirit show you how your talents and gifts are able to do new things. And may you blossom again and again in the light of God. Amen.