

Follow Me | Matthew 4:18-20

According to a 2020 Pew Research study, there are more than 2.3 billion people in the world today who identify as Christians, accounting for nearly 30% of the world's population – almost 1 in 3 people on the planet. And yet – especially, if you spend any time on social media – there may be as much confusion and division and argument these days about what it even means to be a “Christian” as there's ever been.

Now, I'm not here today to pretend that I or we have the one “correct” answer or explanation or only right way to be. But what we want to do today, especially as we launch into the fall season and ministry year together at Southridge, is focus our attention on the *one invitation* that Jesus, himself, made far more than any other while he walked the earth.

And for some of us, I wonder if that invitation may surprise us. Cause depending on our upbringing or exposure to church and religion – or what gets the most attention in our algorithms – there are a few ideas we may think could be the front runners. You know, things like “go to church” or “read your Bible and pray every day.” However, fact is, Jesus is never quoted as saying either of those things. Or perhaps, something like “make sure to vote the right way and get the right candidate in power so we can get our way on the issues we care about.” Yet, to the contrary, Jesus never seemed all that concerned about getting his name on a ballot. Or maybe, you'd assume it'd be something like “accept me into your heart by praying this prayer so you can go to heaven when you die!” However, once again, in the recorded teachings of Jesus, there isn't a single sermon that Jesus ended that way.

And while all of these sentiments can certainly be well-meaning and might even play a role from time to time in our spiritual journey, the truth is, none of them are the *one thing* that Jesus most invited the people who would one day get called “Christians” to actually do.

So, to help us explore that *one thing* together, I want to invite us to turn to a short episode early in the life of Jesus that we find in Matthew Chapter 4.

Where we read this in ***Matthew 4:18-20***:

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

Now first things first, I gotta acknowledge that if you grew up anywhere within a sniff of the church or a Bible, I know this may be one of the most “Sunday School” stories we can get, complete with song and actions that go with it. The story of Jesus strolling by the sea and inviting his first followers to become “fishers of men” and then seeing them immediately drop their nets to do just that. And yet, when it comes to the *one invitation* Jesus made more than any other, I think it’s *the story* for us to lean into this morning because it’s the first story in the entire Bible that contains *the invitation* that Jesus would go on to make more than any other – over 20 times throughout the gospels – the invitation to ***“follow me.”***

But before we can grasp the depth and significance of what this invitation actually meant to Peter and Andrew, we actually need to dive below the surface of this “Sunday School” story in order to really understand, not only what it meant for them, but what it could mean for us today as well. And to help us do that, we first to need get our heads into the world of the first century Jewish education system that Jesus, and his first followers, grew up in.

You see, in Jesus’ day, while there wasn’t a publicly-run school system, the Jewish community took education and child development very seriously. And not just to teach the basics of language and arithmetic, but to train their children in what it meant to live in God’s world and participate in the “life from above” they believed human beings were made to enjoy.

And for them, this was anchored in what they called the **Torah** or “the teaching” – what we know as the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. That they believed that God loved them so much that, through their story and the writings that had been passed down, God had revealed what it meant to know God’s love and live God’s love. And that this was found in teaching and embodying the Torah.

So, at five years old, Jewish kids started school at what was called the **bet sefer** – meaning, “house of the book.” This was the equivalent of an elementary school in a small room built on the side of the local synagogue, run by a full-time scribe or teacher, with Torah as the curriculum. And get this, especially in their oral culture and because of the intense desire to know God’s words from deep within, by the time most children were 10 years old they had memorized the entire Torah – memorized the first five books of the Bible!

But then at that point, since the basic teachings had been internalized by ages 10-12, many of the students went back home to help their parents and support the family business.

But the ones who showed the most promise and an aptitude for continuing their spiritual education then went on to **bet talmud** or “house of learning.” Where, at bet talmud and by age 15, most would have memorized the entire Hebrew Bible – what we know as the Old Testament. 39 books and nearly 600,000 words! Now, I don’t know how you are with memorizing, but while the teenagers in our household can rap all the lyrics to their favourite songs, most days they can barely remember to make their beds! But this was the emphasis the Jewish community put on learning and embracing what life with God could be like.

Now, at that point – after bet talmud – the vast majority of students were finished their education and began their full-time career plying the family trade. However, a very select few – the best of the best of the remaining best – would then be invited into a final phase called **bet midrash** or “house of study.”

And the primary purpose of bet midrash was as a rabbi prep school. Where, after a couple years in bet midrash, usually around age 17, the best of the best of the absolute best – think Ivy League PHD candidates – would then apply to apprentice under a rabbi. Now, this apprenticeship was incredibly hard to get into, because, as part of the application process, the rabbi would put you to the toughest of tests to see whether you had what it takes to be their apprentice and carry their yoke. Their yoke being, their particular way of seeing the world and life with God, all through their particular understanding and application of Torah.

And to become an apprentice – or, in other words, a *disciple* – wasn't just about learning or believing the same ideas as your rabbi, but was about re-arranging and patterning your entire life after theirs. As, at this stage, you were out of the classroom and into the world, with the aim of being attached to your rabbi at the hip. Going where they went. Talking like they talked. Mimicking their every move. So as to eventually carry their yoke and share it with the world. With the **three main goals of the apprenticeship** summarized as: *being with your rabbi, becoming like your rabbi*, and eventually *doing everything your rabbi did*.

And so, after the very select few of students who could make it through bet talmud – the Ivy League of Jewish life – while very few of even the *best* of the *absolute best* of *these remaining best* would ultimately pass the test to apprentice under a rabbi, for those who could prove their worthiness – prove they had what it takes – upon their acceptance, the rabbi would then say to them in Hebrew: **“Lech acharai...” Or, “Come, follow me.”**

Interestingly, the same invitation that Jesus suddenly and surprisingly extended to Peter and Andrew in our “Sunday School” story. And *the invitation* Jesus would go on to extend more than any other throughout his life and teaching. You see, like the rabbis of his day, this was Jesus' invitation to *apprentice* under him. To enter the school of life of apprenticeship with him as your rabbi. This is what Jesus meant by **“Come, follow me.”**

In fact, as you follow the life and teaching of Jesus with his apprentices – or *disciples* – throughout the gospels, you actually see Jesus highlight all three goals of apprenticeship.

Where, in **Mark 3:13-14**, it says:

Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him.

That Jesus' invitation to "follow him" was an invitation for his apprentices to "be with him." To spend every waking moment with him. To sleep at his side. To eat at his table. To sit at his feet. To go where he went. To hang out with the people he hung out with.

And then, during one of his sermons in **Luke 6:40**, Jesus said this:

The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher.

Here, expressing the idea to his disciples, that as apprentices, they were in the process of becoming like their teacher, Jesus. Mimicking his character. Modeling his behaviour. Thinking like him. Talking like him. Treating others like him.

And then, to the third goal, after his disciples had been with him three years, on the night before he died, Jesus said to his apprentices in **John 14:12**:

Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these.

That, as a result of *being with him* and going on the journey of *becoming like him*, Jesus said his apprentices would now go on to do the same kinds of things that Jesus did – and, according to Jesus, even greater things! – carrying his yoke and sharing it with the world. To ultimately do as their rabbi did, fulfilling the goals of their apprenticeship to him, all as what Jesus meant when he invited Peter and Andrew to "*Come, follow me.*"

Now, a couple other important details from the story to help us fully grasp its significance...

First, I hope we now have a better understanding of why Peter and Andrew were so ready and willing to drop everything in that moment and follow Jesus. That in a Jewish world where obtaining an apprenticeship under a rabbi was seen as the highest calling and achievement, this was like Taylor Swift getting noticed in a café at 14 and immediately signed to a record deal! Or like, if Rudy Ruettiger – from the great football movie *Rudy* – had suddenly been offered a full ride at Notre Dame, rather than having to grind his way through summer school and tryouts! You see, for Peter and Andrew, this was a no-brainer invitation.

And then, as part of that invitation, when it comes to Jesus saying, ***“I will send you out to fish for people.”*** While this was certainly a poignant play-on-words relevant to Peter and Andrew’s profession – and one that makes for cute actions to the Sunday School song – the idea of “fishing for people” wasn’t Jesus’ cheesy way of saying they were now going to make converts. But was actually an idiom used among the rabbis to describe the greatest of rabbis who developed the uncanny ability to capture people’s minds and imaginations with their vision for life, and especially through how they lived and invited others into the life and love of God. That “fishing for people” would be about capturing the world’s imagination through inviting them into a life people only dreamt of by embracing Jesus’ yoke and imitating his love.

This was the *no-brainer “come, follow me” to-be-a-part-of-changing-the-world* invitation that caused Peter and Andrew to leave their nets at once and become apprentices to Jesus.

And friends, I believe, that’s the same invitation that Jesus has for us today. *The invitation* that Jesus made more than any other – the invitation to *follow him* – as the defining centre of what it means to put our faith in him and become one of his apprentices.

I love how author John Mark Comer, in his book *Practicing the Way*, describes Jesus' invitation in contrast to what many of us have heard or assumed. He writes:

Contrary to what many assume, Jesus did not invite people to convert to Christianity. He didn't even call people to become Christians; he invited people to apprentice under him into a whole new way of living.

That whatever we have understood the word "Christian" to mean, the primary invitation of Jesus is to follow him as an apprentice by re-arranging our entire lives around three goals: to be with Jesus, to become like Jesus, and to continually grow in our capacity to do more of what Jesus did. To live with Jesus, learn from Jesus, and to ultimately become people of love in the way of Jesus.

And this then begs the question, what would happen if those of us who aspire to be "Christians" actually did that? On that note, the philosopher Dallas Willard once wrote:

The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who are identified as "Christians" will become disciples – students, apprentices, practitioners – of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Heavens into every corner of human existence.

Now, isn't that a bold statement? That the greatest issue the world faces is whether billions of people who claim some kind of faith in Jesus will actually make the primary goal of their lives to become like him? But just think: What if we were to become people who were grounded and self-controlled in the face of life's temptations? Or people who could live increasingly free of worry and non-anxiously as we trust in God's provision? Or people who could naturally respond with compassion and justice to those who are suffering? Or who could offer grace and forgiveness in the face of betrayal? Or who could be hospitable and non-judgmental with those who are different? Or who could grieve our losses while holding hope? Or who could know a depth of friendship in a world of loneliness? Or who could become willing to lay down our preferences – and even our lives – for the sake of love?

And friends, I suppose, therein lies the catch...

That while, for Peter and Andrew, this was essentially a no-brainer invitation from the greatest rabbi they had ever seen, as it turned out, it wasn't a *no-cost* invitation (and, in this way, a little different than Taylor or Rudy). As Jesus also said in **Matthew 16:24**:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

That, as Jesus' apprentices responded to his invitation to be with him, become like him, and do what he did, over time Jesus showed them this would mean laying down their lives for others, just as Jesus, as the ultimate revelation of God's love, laid down his life for them.

But, while the cost of following and apprenticing under Jesus has the potential to be great, here's the final beauty of this "Sunday School" story that I want to highlight today: and it's found in how Jesus says "whoever." That **whoever** wants to be my disciple – my apprentice – is invited. Not only the best of the best of the absolute best, but *whoever*.

Because who were Peter and Andrew before Jesus extended his *one* invitation?

They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

They were *fishermen*. (Again, not as Jesus' clever strategy to give us a cute song 2,000 years later.) But because they were working in the family business. They were plying their trade. Because they never qualified for apprenticeship. They were bet talmud – think "high school" – drop outs. They hadn't made the cut. They didn't have what it takes. And they knew their future would be focused on just trying to get by and hopefully having a little fun on the weekends.

Until, Jesus said to these high school drops: "*Come, follow me.*"

In fact, Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple – my apprentice – is invited to come, follow me.” Come be with me. Come become like me. And come learn to do what I have done. And though it may cost you everything, I will lead you into the life you were made for. Knowing and experiencing the fullness of the love of God and sharing that love with everyone around you. With your friends. With your family. With your neighbours. With your co-workers. With your teammates. With those on the margins. With those who are different. Even with your enemies. All in a way and with a love that has the power to change everything.

So friends, what does it mean to be “Christian”? Well, the truth is, it probably depends who you ask. But if you’re looking to Jesus (the “Christ”), he gave one invitation more than any other: *Follow me*. And I think he wants to say to us today: *Follow me*. And it turns out that anyone and everyone is invited. Even, if not especially, those who feel like they don’t make the cut or haven’t had what it takes or thought they didn’t belong. Cause Jesus says that this invitation is for *whoever* wants to follow him as an apprentice into his life of love.

And around here, that’s the one thing we want to pursue together. That’s the one thing we want to orient our lives and our community around. Becoming apprentices of Jesus through being with him, becoming like him, and doing more of what he did, so that we can all grow in becoming people of love like Jesus.

And that’s going to be the focus of the rest of this September series – and even our focus for the coming year. To learn what it means to be with Jesus, especially in the reality that we don’t live in the same physical time and space that Jesus lived in. We’re going to talk about how we can actually become more like Jesus, because we’re all becoming someone and what would it look like if Jesus was our model and the person we’re trying to become most like. And, we want to keep encouraging one another to grow in doing more of what Jesus did, together as his hands and feet in the world.

Cause can you imagine if 1 in 3 people you bumped into on the planet embodied and exuded the love of Jesus? Especially in light of the many heartbreaking challenges and needs we face in our world today! And can you imagine if one of those people were you? How might that not only change your life but have the potential to be a part of changing everything?!

Friends, what if we said “yes” to Jesus’ one invitation today and aspired together to become his apprentices, following him into the life and the love he has in store?

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On your way into the service you should have received a small card... “*At once they _____ and followed him.*”

Let’s pray together...