

22 January 2012
Epiphany 3 / Sanctity of Life Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Follow Me”

Text: Mark 1:14-20; Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Follow me,” Jesus said. That call in itself was not so unusual. Lots of Rabbis had followers. People who would literally follow them around and learn of their teachings, of their philosophies, of their way of life. The students would emulate their teachers and carry on for them when they died. But that’s the thing - they always died.

And so when Jesus said to Simon and Andrew, James and John that day, **“follow me,”** that call in itself was not so unusual. What was unusual was where Jesus was going, and where He was calling them to follow Him to - the cross. To be sure, they would hear lots of teaching on the way. They would see amazing things - Jesus healing the sick, cleansing lepers, casting out demons, and raising the dead. They would see Him challenged, and see Him challenging the philosophies and lives of others. But none of that was what Jesus was really all about. Jesus was about the cross, where He would lay down His life for the life of the world.

And so Jesus’ call was not primarily about a new teaching, a new philosophy, or a new way of life. In fact, Jesus was teaching what was *old*, what had already been given in the Old Testament. What He wanted them to see was that He was *fulfilling* it. And Jesus’ call was not primarily about His disciples emulating Him - of seeing Him as an example and doing what He did. For what Jesus came to do He came to do *for us*, in our place, as our substitute.

And so while Jesus’ call was, in itself, not so unusual, it was different. What Jesus wanted His followers to see and learn was that **“the kingdom of God is at hand,”** for in Jesus, God had come to earth to establish His kingdom. A kingdom not just of rules or teachings or philosophies to follow, but a kingdom of life. Eternal life. And so their message would be **“repent and believe in the Gospel.”** Their task would not be to imitate Jesus in life or in death, but to point to Him as the One who did for us what we could not do for ourselves; as the One who did what no other teaching or philosophy or way of life could do - conquer death.

For this is why He came. Other Rabbis lived and then died; Jesus came to die and

then live. The twelve would be sent out to preach that very fact - that in Jesus there is life. And so **repent**, turn from following teachings and philosophies and ways of life that lead to death, and **believe in the Gospel** - that in Jesus there is life, for in Jesus there is the forgiveness of sins.

You see, that's the thing we sometimes forget - that death is sin made visible. Death is horrible, death is grizzly, death is sad, death is separation because sin is all those things. We die because sin robs us of life. We were not created to die. Sin and death are intrusions into life. And so if death is to be defeated, then sin must be defeated. That's why science will never be able to defeat death. It can prolong and extend life, but only the One who defeats sin can defeat death. And that is what Jesus has come to do.

And so Jesus is not just another teaching or philosophy or way of life. It's not just a matter of *you have your rabbi and I have mine* - which so many today think, that Jesus is just one of many. If it were just a matter of following an example, that would be true. But following Jesus is following Him to the cross. It is to see there your sin and death on the innocent one who deserves no death. It is to see there your substitute. It is to see there the great love of God for you, and that that's how **the kingdom of God is at hand**; that's how God is establishing His kingdom on earth - through the forgiveness of sins. For there is no other way out of death to life.

And so Simon and Andrew, James and John, follow Jesus. They had no idea what they were in for. They would see the unimaginable, hear a teaching with an authority not of this earth, and become convinced that Jesus of Nazareth is God in the flesh . . . and then see God die for His creation. The sin of the world all counted against Him on the cross and its price paid, and so death be dealt with once and for all. That no longer would death end life, but life end death. And when Jesus rose from death, that's exactly what we see - a life that ends death.

"Follow me," Jesus says, and see this. **Follow me** and hear that I forgive you all your sins; all your grizzly, horrible, unthinkable sins. I know them all for I took them all upon myself on the cross. I was declared guilty for you so that you would be declared not guilty because of me. And so **follow me** and no longer die a death that ends *your* life, but receive a life that will end your death.

That is the message this Life Sunday. It is, in fact, the same message we preach every Sunday - that in Jesus there is life, for in Jesus there is the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness that we need.

You see, that's the danger of separating out a special Sanctity of Life Sunday - if the Gospel of forgiveness is the same as that preached and given here every Sunday, then what is different about this Sunday becomes the Law, and so we either

become prideful that we're better *followers* of Christ than those *others* who don't regard life as sacred, or this Sunday becomes a guilt trip to stir you up to be a better *follower* of Christ and to do more. Should we be doing more? Yes. Absolutely. Always. But if that's all this Sunday is about, it would be better to skip it altogether. For the Law is good . . . if it leads us to Christ and His life. And so today is not a day for pride or to heap guilt, but a day to **repent and believe in the Gospel**. The Gospel of Life.

For to be sure, abortion is a problem. 54 million in the United States alone these past 39 years, and the number is still growing. And the problem is moving from the clinic to the pharmacy, where abortions may soon be as easy to get as buying and taking aspirin. But it's not just abortion, but also mercy killing, suicide, withholding treatment from those who need it, making decision about how to spend health care dollars not based on need but who will provide the greatest return on investment. The problem is how many are seduced into seeing death as the answer and solution to their problems, to their suffering, to their sin? Even Christians. Even you and I. For the same fears, the same greed, the same lusts, the same selfishness all live in our hearts too. Christians have abortions. Christians commit suicide. Christians lash out and kill in thought, word, deed, and desire.

And so to you and to all, the message this Life Sunday is . . . **welcome**. Welcome here with the rest of us sinners, with the rest of us who have followed the wrong path. Welcome and receive the washing of Jesus' forgiveness for your sins, for all your sins, whatever and how many they may be. There is no sin and no sinner too big. If there were, then you can be sure God would not have sent Jonah to Nineveh! Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and the Assyrians were some of the meanest, vilest, orneriest, stubbornest, evilest people ever. That's why Jonah didn't want to go. But God would not let him not go. For even for them Jesus died. For their sin, that they may live.

And so for you. For every life is valuable to God, whether you live in a house or in a womb; whether you're up and walking around or confined to a wheelchair; whether you are out making a name for yourself or no longer able to remember anyone's name; whether you're from Israel or Nineveh or the United States. You are valuable to God. You may not be valuable to anyone else, but you are to God. You are worth the life of His Son, who died that you may live.

Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James, and John to follow Him and see that - to follow Him to the cross and see Him die for the sin of the world, and rise for the life of the world. And then to proclaim that message to the world. That all people may see and know and receive that life. A life that starts even now as Jesus and His life live in you. As you receive His Word of forgiveness and His Body and Blood as your nourishment and strength. As you not only follow Him but live in Him and He in

you. As so you now bring His life and love to others - speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves, defending the defenseless, proclaiming life. And proclaiming His message of victory over death, His hope in the midst of despair, His love for the vulnerable, His strength for the weak, and His good coming from suffering. God will give you the opportunities. He will work through you. ***Follow me***, He simply says, and He will do the rest.

And He has! And that's the bottom line, this Life Sunday. He has. ***Repent and believe in Him.***

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.