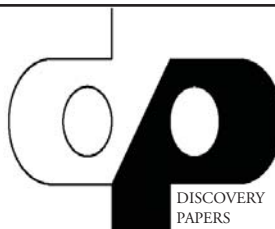




CALLING FOR FOLLOWERS



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John 1:35-51
4th Message
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When I was a kid, this word was an insult. It was what you called someone who wasn't original. Someone who didn't know what they wanted. Someone who didn't think for themselves, but just went along with what everyone else did.

You're such a follower.

Nobody wants to be just one of the crowd. You want to be in front. You want to set the trends, not follow them. You know the saying, "If you aren't the lead dog, the view never changes."

Today we are continuing in our series on the Gospel of John that we have called *Signs of Life*. We're on a ten month journey walking through this incredible work of literature. We're seeing how the author of this gospel presents Jesus as the source of life to a world that desperately wants to live. We're seeing how he sprinkles signs and images that point to Jesus and repeatedly suggest that believing in Jesus leads to life.

We've identified nine of those images and this morning we're on the second image of *BIRTH*. All throughout this section there is the sense of something beginning.

Last week we looked at John the Baptist. And while we talked about ways that we can emulate him, his lifestyle—for most of us—is a bit out of reach. So John is a great leader and figure, but as a model, he might be a bit of a stretch for many of us.

This week we meet four ordinary people making a big decision. They each decide to follow Jesus. What a bunch of followers. And yet, they all have reasons for following Jesus. Jesus seems to offer each of them something different. And we just might find that we want some of the things that they want too.

This week we see Jesus calling for followers.

For us, these four people are great examples. These are people that we can emulate because we are like them. While we may not be able to start out with the kind of faith and purpose that John the Baptist shows us, we can take one step.

Whether you are investigating Christianity for the

first time or have been a Christian for several decades, everything in faith begins with a step toward Jesus. As we hear the stories of these individuals, I'd like to ask each of you to think about a step that you can take toward Jesus.

Your step doesn't have to be like anyone else's. It doesn't have to be huge. But think about one step that you might take toward Jesus as we hear these stories this morning. What step is Jesus asking you to take?

What do you want?

We finished up last week by seeing John the Baptist identify Jesus. He exclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God." Today, the story starts in the same place as a sort of bridge between focusing on John and the disciples.

We'll start by reading John 1:35-39 and hear about the first disciples that followed Jesus.

John 1:35-39:

³⁵The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" ³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" ³⁹He said to them, "Come and you will see." So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour

Here's the scene. John the Baptist is there with two individuals. They hear John call Jesus "the Lamb of God" and they are intrigued. They want to know more. So they follow Jesus for a bit to see where things will lead. And Jesus asks them a simple question, "What are you seeking?"

We don't know the names of these two people yet. In the next verse, though, we find out that one of them is Andrew. It's pretty likely because of the way that John writes his gospel that he is the second one. He has a tendency to include himself in his story as an unnamed participant.

I think at this point Andrew and John are a bit flustered. I think that they didn't really want to be noticed. They knew that Jesus was something special. They wanted to be around him. They wanted to take something in. But they didn't want to be noticed. At this point, they just wanted to sit in the back and watch.

Maybe some of you have been like this or are like this. Maybe you are here because you know something special is going on and you want to find out about it or experience it, but you don't want to be noticed. Maybe you slip in after the service starts and leave right away. If this describes you, that's fine. That's where Andrew and John start out.

But that doesn't last forever. Jesus notices Andrew and John and he turns to speak to them. "What do you want?" he asks them. I don't think it's a threatening question. At least it's not meant to be. It's not as if Jesus is angry with them or annoyed with them. He's asking them for real. What is it that you want?

And they don't really know how to answer the question. What are you seeking? That's a huge kind of question to ask. How do you go about answering that question? I want a nap; I want the 49ers to win today; I want a sandwich for lunch; I want to be happy. How do you answer a question like that? What kind of answer are you looking for?

They don't know how to answer, so they don't. Instead, they ask Jesus a question. They stumble and say, "Where you are staying?" They aren't sure what they want, but they know it involves Jesus. They want to spend more time with him. They want to investigate further.

And so Jesus invites them to do just that. He says to them, "Come and see." Jesus invites them to go with him and find out where he's staying. Jesus knows they don't want an address. They aren't really interested in knowing the location of the house. They want to be with him. So he invites them to do just that. Come along; spend more time with me; see what you think.

The other day I was driving in downtown Palo Alto and noticed this huge line outside a new ice cream place called CREAM. It must have been almost an hour wait. I've asked people about this place. The big deal is apparently fresh baked cookies with ice cream in the middle. Now, I love ice cream. And I love cookies. So this place sounds like it is right up my alley. But even if it weren't, the fact that people are crowding around it like that makes me want to try it out.

That's what got things going for Andrew and John. Something was happening with this John the Baptist guy, so they went out to the wilderness to check it out. Then he said that Jesus was the point of it all: "Behold, the Lamb

of God." They weren't really sure what that meant, but they wanted to find out more. So they followed him and ended up spending the day with him.

And so our first character that we are considering this morning is Andrew. Jesus asked him a simple but profound question, "what are you seeking?" Andrew didn't know, but as he discovered Jesus, he came to the conclusion that he was seeking the Messiah. In the next section, we hear him report, "we have found the Messiah." Andrew wasn't sure what he was looking for, but he found the Messiah.

Put yourself in the place of Andrew and allow Jesus to ask you this dangerous question. "What are you seeking?" What do you want?

Just as Andrew and John stumbled with this question, we might stumble as well. It's a simple question if you're standing in line at McDonald's. It's a gut-wrenching question if you're a few feet away from the Messiah and you didn't really want to be noticed. A lot of us probably don't really know what we're really seeking.

I actually find myself asking this question a lot and most of the time I don't know. There are times when I complain about life and wish things were different. I wish things were different. I wish my situation was different. I wish the people in my life acted differently. On a few occasions, people have asked me this question. "Ok, what is it that you want? What would the world look like if you could change it?" And I find myself stumbling without an answer. I'm not sure what it is that I want.

But when I see Jesus here and I hear about the Lamb of God then perhaps that is what I want. Perhaps I want a deeper experience of life. I want to know that I am living the life I was intended to live. I am fulfilling my purpose and finding the satisfaction that comes from it. I guess I want life.

And so that brings me to Jesus. As I stumble; not really sure how to get more life, but willing to take a step. For Andrew and John it was a step toward the house Jesus was in. For us, maybe it's another morning picking up the Bible, or another Sunday driving to church, or a small group of people to invest in, or a trip overseas, or the decision to get baptized into faith in Christ. It could be any number of things. What are you seeking? What is the step that you might take to find it?

Who are you?

The first character we took a look at was Andrew. He follows Jesus, gets noticed, goes to his house and spends a day with Jesus. Andrew has such a powerful experience with Jesus that he wants to include others. He has come

and he has seen. Now he wants others to experience that as well. The next character we'll look at is Andrew's brother.

John 1:40-42:

⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ). ⁴²He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).

The readers of this gospel would know who Simon Peter is. Remember that this gospel was probably written near the end of the first century. Peter had already had a significant ministry at this point and had probably already been martyred. Simon Peter was a huge figure. So this little story of how he started to follow Jesus is like a story about the first time Colin Kaepernick (the 49ers quarterback) ever held a football. It's the background of a famous person.

This particular background is about the time that this famous person got their nickname. Only it wasn't just a nickname for Peter—it was a completely new name.

It's a curious story because we don't hear anything from Simon. He doesn't ask a question. We don't hear of any interaction between Jesus and Simon. There must have been. It's not as if they didn't speak to each other. But the story doesn't record it. There are only two statements. The first is Andrew speaking of Jesus. He says, "We have found the Messiah." The second is Jesus speaking of Jesus. He says, "You shall be called Cephas" which would be the Aramaic form of the Greek name Peter.

Notice that both of these statements have to do with identity. Andrew brings Simon to Jesus because he found out the true identity of this guy. He was the Messiah. As soon as Jesus meets Peter, he changes his name. In ancient times, your name was far more than simply the sound that referred to you. It was your identity. Your name was who you were. Your name was you.

So for Jesus to change Simon's name is to say, immediately, that if you follow me, then you will be entering into a new identity. Everything about you will change. You will no longer simply be the Simon that you once were. You will be Peter. You will be the Rock. If you follow me, you will find out who you really are.

Simon could have walked away. He could have left Jesus behind and kept on being Simon. We can understand this scene as Jesus offering to change Simon's name. If he went back to his village and kept on with his previous life, then

nothing would have changed for him. At this moment, Simon had a choice to make. Would he turn away and keep being Simon or would he follow Jesus and become Peter.

The question that Jesus asked Andrew was "what are you seeking?" It was an explicit question. Jesus doesn't ask Simon a question in so many words, but there is the strong implication of a question. There is a decision that Simon is facing. It's as if Jesus is asking him, "Who do you want to be?" Go home and be Simon or follow me and be Peter. Who do you want to be?

The issue of identity is huge in our culture. I recently finished reading a novel about someone who went through life as an identity thief. The book asked all sorts of questions about identity. How can someone steal your identity? Are you a person or are you a name with a social security number, a credit rating, and an entry in some database somewhere. What is even the nature of identity?

If the issue of desire is central for Andrew, then perhaps the issue of identity is central for Simon Peter. Later in his life, Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:4-5:

"As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Peter is pointing out that when he came to Jesus, he became the rock. And he's suggesting that when we come to him, we become living stones. We become rocks like Peter. Our identity changes as we follow Jesus.

So what about you? Who do you want to be?

In our culture, this is the question that we are asked all the time. But we think we have to answer it for ourselves. We live under the illusion that we can decide who we are. We are faced with opportunities and choices. We need to make the most of the situations we find ourselves in. If we choose well, we could be somebody. If we don't, we will be forgotten.

We decide which pictures of us we share online for others to see. Through our statuses, we decide whether we are known as snarky or spiritual or insightful or boring. In our culture, this question can be terrifying and debilitating. Who do you want to be? Choose wisely or you will be nobody.

But that's not the way that Jesus asks it at all. When he asks us this question, he is not laying the burden of identity on us as our culture does. He is saying, "If you

come to me, you will find out who you really are.” Come to me and allow me to give you your identity.

This is such a relief. It’s impossible to make myself into someone else. Believe me, I’ve tried. But I can come toward Jesus. I can allow my identity to be changed because of his identity. He is the Messiah, the Creator, the source of Life, the Redeemer, the King. Because of who he is, he will change who I am. I don’t have to do it on my own.

Who do you want to be? Come to Jesus and find out who you are meant to be.

Where do you want to go?

We saw Andrew who was asked the question, “What are you seeking?” Now Simon has been asked the question, “Who do you want to be?” The next individual has the shortest and simplest story. Next Jesus encounters Philip. This is what happens with him.

John 1:43-44:

**⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.”
⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.**

Because of the connection with Andrew and Peter, they probably made some kind of a connection between Philip and Jesus. Then, without a lot of fanfare, Jesus meets Philip and says simply, “follow me.”

Philip’s life changed in that moment. Bethsaida was a fishing village, barely a city, in the far north of Galilee. It was the middle of nowhere. There was nothing happening there. It wasn’t the center of excitement. When Philip decided to follow Jesus, he started an adventure that would take him to all sorts of places.

Because he followed Jesus, Philip ended up taking part in 5000 people being fed out of a single lunch bag and introducing Jesus to a Greek community. Tradition holds it that after Jesus’ resurrection, Philip headed off on a solo missionary enterprise all around the area.

His story reminds me of a young man that I met in India. I’ll just refer to him by his first initial, V. V works with Operation Mobilization in Bangalore. When he became a Christian, he was kicked out of his house and he assumed that he would have to live on the streets. Instead, God called him to spend two years on one of OM’s cruise ships that sails around to different ports all across the world to offer books, Bible studies, and health services to people who wouldn’t otherwise have access to them.

As we talked, I remember his amazement at where following Jesus had led him. He never thought he’d go any of the places that God led him.

That’s not to say that following Jesus always leads you to exotic places. But it will lead you to unexpected places.

If the question for Andrew was “What are you seeking?” and the question for Peter was “Who do you want to be?” then the question for Philip was something like “Where do you want to go?”

Jesus simply looked at him and said follow me. Go your own way to where your life will take you or follow me and see where you end up. You will be surprised by it and challenged by it, but it will be an adventure. Andrew was given what he wanted; Peter was given a new identity; Philip was offered an adventure.

Talk to people who have followed Jesus a long time and they will have all sorts of stories. Following Jesus is a life of adventure. It’s not always glamorous. In fact, it’s often exactly the opposite.

Some have followed Jesus into the darkest places of our world. I remember being told that I was the first white person ever to step foot in a particular slum that we visited on one of our trips to India. Some have given up living in nice places and safe neighborhoods to reach the poor and lonely of the world.

Some have followed Jesus into dangerous places. Friends of mine from seminary are serving in the Middle East under the cover of a false profession. They could be killed if their real purpose is discovered.

Some have followed Jesus into the unknown places of their own heart; struggling with loneliness, depression, or anger. Some have had to figure out how to love others in the midst of deep personal brokenness.

Some have followed Jesus into a life that looks a lot more normal than they ever thought they’d lead—life in the suburbs, playing soccer on the weekends, and volunteering at school.

Jesus leads people everywhere, from the dangers of the Middle East, to the slums of India, to the schools of Los Altos. Wherever it is, following Jesus is guaranteed to be an adventure.

What about you? Where do you want to go? This question holds true whether you’re considering following Jesus for the first time or following him into some new chapter of your life.

Are you tempted to go back to Bethsaida where it is safe and calm? Or are you willing to follow him wherever he might lead you? He may not ask you to leave. It may not be a physical destination. But even your day-to-day life can be lived with the awareness of following where Jesus guides your steps or ignoring that.

Where do you want to go?

How much do you want to see?

We've seen Andrew and John follow Jesus timidly and then find out who he really was. We've seen Jesus offer Simon a whole new identity. We've seen Philip receive an invitation to follow Jesus into a life of adventure and service. Now we arrive at our fourth and final character.

In a lot of ways, the story has been building toward this final interaction. It's the longest interaction recorded between Jesus and one of his disciples as part of their initial calling. It's actually a whole conversation.

John 1:45-51:

⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." ⁴⁹Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

This final scene unfolds in two parts. First, Philip goes and finds Nathanael to report to him. There is a strong parallel here with the previous account. First Andrew meets Jesus and then goes to get Peter. Then Philip meets Jesus and then goes to get Nathanael. These two stories are playing out the same way.

But where it is different is in Nathanael's response. Philip finds him and makes this incredible statement: "We have found the one the world has been waiting for: the one that all of history and our entire religious tradition

has been leading us up to." And Nathanael's response is classic. You have to appreciate his honesty even if he's a bit rough around the edges. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Nathanael is not convinced. He is skeptical. Maybe he has been burned by promises in the past. Maybe he is tired of all the so-called Messiahs that have come around. He sounds a bit jaded. He's grumpy. And he's doubtful. Maybe that describes some of you. Maybe you're jaded or confused or skeptical. Maybe you're not even sure why you're here this morning.

So Philip offers him the same invitation that Jesus offered Andrew: "Come and see." He tells him not to take his word for it—come find out for yourself. And Nathanael does. Nathanael may be skeptical and jaded and bitter, but he's willing to come. He's willing to give it a shot. Maybe some of you are skeptical, but you're here this morning. You're willing to come and see. That says a lot. It's a great start.

As soon as Jesus sees him he immediately calls him out. The meaning of the phrase "in whom there is no deceit" just means that he is a straightforward person. He doesn't try to put on pretenses or pretend to be something he's not. We've already seen that demonstrated in his response to Philip. Nathanael tells it like it is.

His response to Jesus is surprise, "How do you know me?" I think you can detect a little of the same sarcasm or attitude there from his first comment. So Jesus answers him simply, "I saw you when you were under the fig tree."

We don't know what Jesus saw about Nathanael that happened under the fig tree. Fig trees were common for families to have near their homes, so people speculate that Jesus is referring to an event that happened near Nathanael's home. It was also common to use their shade as a place for meditation, study, and prayer. So it's possible that Nathanael had recently had some powerful experience with God under a fig tree. Or maybe he had asked for God to do something while sitting under a fig tree. Or maybe something else happened that we can't even speculate.

Whatever it was, it was significant because as soon as Jesus refers to that moment, everything changes for Nathanael. He goes from being skeptical and bitter to being completely convinced. He declares that Jesus is "the Son of God" and the "King of Israel." The fact that Jesus knew about the fig-tree moment changed everything for Nathanael.

And the story concludes with Jesus making a great promise to Nathanael. "If you think that was cool, wait until you see what comes next." You haven't seen anything

yet. If you're impressed by that, you won't believe what you'll see on this journey.

The question to Andrew was "What do you want?" The question to Peter was "Who do you want to be?" The question to Philip was "Where do you want to go?" And the question for Nathanael is "How far are you willing to take this?" How much do you want to see? How far are you willing to go?

Jesus makes some huge promises to Nathanael. "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Wow. This is big. Jesus doesn't talk that way to anyone else. Why does he say this to Nathanael? What does it mean for us?

Nathanael started out skeptical, but when he became convinced, he went all the way. He jumped in with both feet. But maybe he didn't really know what to expect. Like I said, we don't know what happened under the fig tree, but it must have been powerful. However, Jesus almost seems to rebuke Nathanael for being satisfied too quickly.

What about us? Are we satisfied too easily? Do we come to Jesus and just want him to help us not get sick and make our lives work like we want them to and give us the kind of life we think we deserve? Are we here just because we believe in the morals of Christianity and we want to be around people who think the same way we do.

Put simply, are we settling for too little as we follow Jesus?

Yesterday morning, I gathered with a group of pastors and business leaders from around the bay area. We were talking about our desire to see the Bay Area changed by the gospel. Several of us had a growing sense that God is doing something unique in our area right now. Healthy churches are being planted in San Francisco. Service teams are making a huge impact in San Jose. Relationships are forming. People are gathering to pray.

Honestly, some of this was a bit challenging. How far am I willing to go? Am I satisfied to see Christ change my life? Am I satisfied if God keeps PBC's budget stable and I have a paycheck next year? Do I just care about how my ministry runs in my church in my little circle?

Or do I want to see how God might change this area of the country that is rich, powerful, innovative, dynamic, and for the most part, completely godless? Do I want to see God changing the reputation of the churches in the Bay

Area? Do I want to see people coming to Jesus to receive this life that John keeps talking about?

Do I want to see heaven opened and angels ascending and descending?

Yes. I think I do. Do you?

We don't know what Nathanael chose. We don't hear much more about him after this—he didn't become one of the twelve. I think he might have been scared off. I think that seeing heaven opened might have been more than he really wanted.

What about you? How far will you go?

Conclusion

The Gospel of John started out with a cosmic description of Jesus. Then John the Baptist came on the scene to formally introduce Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and the Son of God who has come to rule. Now, as Jesus starts off his ministry, we see him calling for followers. We see him building his kingdom.

Notice that none of these four people have incredible faith. In fact, the strongest statement is made by Nathanael, the one of these four that we don't hear much about after this. The other three have begun a process. They've started something that will lead them further and further into the life of a disciple.

We've seen four different questions Jesus asked them and we've been invited to consider them for ourselves as well.

What about you? What steps are you being asked to consider?

What do you want?

Who do you want to be?

Where do you want to go?

How far are you willing to take this?

Jesus is calling for disciples. He's asking for steps of faith. How will you respond?