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Matthew 4:12-23

Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalm 27:1,4-9

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

January 26, 2020

The Third Sunday after Epiphany

I am always in awe of the faith of the first disciples. For their ability to follow Jesus with this exuberance of faith. Jesus calls. They follow.

As a preacher, I have a choice. I could focus on their faithful response and talk to you about what that kind of faithfulness might look like for us today. How can we more like Peter and Andrew? Or, I could focus on the alternative. Which frankly, for me, is more compelling in regards to the world we live in today. Why would we NOT follow?

I ran across an article the other day that caught my attention. It was an article written by Rachel Held Evans, who was a beautiful Christian writer and thinker, and, it outlined why she had a crisis of faith and left church for a time. It was her rationale as to why she didn't want to follow anymore. Surprisingly, (or not surprisingly...I'm not sure which is more accurate), I have heard all of these rationales at one time or another. From friends, family, acquaintances, from myself. My guess is that some of these may ring true for you.

Here a few reasons from her list:

- I left the church because my questions were seen as liabilities.
- I left the church because I felt like I was the only one troubled by stories of violence...found in the Bible, and I was tired of people telling me not to worry about it because "God's ways are higher than our ways."
- I left the church because I knew I would never see a woman behind the pulpit, at least not in the congregation in which I grew up.
- I left the church because I wanted to help people in my community without feeling pressure to convert them to Christianity.
- I left the church because there are days when I'm not sure I believe in God, and no one told me that "dark nights of the soul" can be part of the faith experience.
- I left the church because one day, they put signs out in the church lawn that said "Marriage = 1 Man + 1 Woman: Vote Yes on Prop 1," and I knew the moment I saw them that I never wanted to come back.

I've heard more from other people.....

- I left church because I see too much hypocrisy in people who call themselves Christians.
- I left church because nobody looks like me.
- I left church because I was abused by an adult parishioner when I was growing up.
- I left church because my marriage failed and I was told that God wouldn't approve.
- I left church because my spouse died and God didn't answer my prayers for healing.
- I left church because I was shamed for my sexuality.

In fact, it isn't hard to find reasons why people leave church, why they choose not to follow. They have been injured, disillusioned, left out. From abuse to judgement to condemnation to a lack of love and care. And so, people stop coming. They point their finger at God or the "church" or "faith" as the problem.

I had a friend who refused to have her marriage blessed in the name of God because she knew too many women who had stayed in abusive relationships because that's what they felt the church expected of them. As in for better or for worse. Wives be subject to your husbands. And my friend couldn't wrap her head around a God who would allow that to happen or a church that would teach that women had no voice. And so, she turned away and didn't want any part of that kind of blessing.

It broke my heart. In fact, all of these reasons break my heart. And if anyone tells me these reasons are because God isn't good or that church is bad or faith is irrelevant, I want to throw my arms around them and say please give it another chance. Let me show you something different.

Because at the root of every single one of these reasons, is the misappropriation of God, the misappropriation of the church, and the misappropriation of faith for human purposes. Purposes that are far less than anything God ever intended. People just like you and me who have created a religion that upholds their own interests, their own power, their own opinions of right and wrong. It keeps some on top with a fabricated moral compass that says God won't love you unless you look and act like me. And then they point to a few obscure verses in the Bible out of context and say the Bible says it so I believe it.

Maybe it sounds as though I am on a soapbox this morning. Maybe I am. But, I got so exasperated thinking about those disciples in Matthew who ran after Jesus as though he were the best thing ever. Jesus said, follow me, and they did. Immediately. So, what made them want to chase after this faith while others of us run away?

Maybe it's because they got to see and know the real Jesus – in person. Not some faulty, reinterpreted version of Christianity. Maybe because they saw first-hand what unconditional love was like, what it meant to heal the sick, and care for the weak, to stand up to injustice, to feed the hungry, to hang out with sinners and adulterers and tax collectors. Maybe they experienced what it meant to be valued and included and needed without judgement and without condemnation. Who wouldn't want to follow that?

I heard a fantastic quote the other day which said, I have never heard of people leaving church because of God. It's a powerful statement. One that says the reasons we leave are never because of God but because of people. Because of our own misinterpretations. Because of our own need for affirmation. Because of our own desire to be surrounded by people who look like us and think like us. Because of our own need to be comfortable. And if you look back at all the reasons of why people don't follow Jesus, the root is always found within our relationships with

one another, not within God's relationship with us. As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry so boldly states, If it's not about love, it's not about God.

So what does that mean for us? It means we have a chance to right the wrongs, to welcome those who haven't been included, to love those who have felt unloved by the church. We have a powerful opportunity to live into that sign that hangs right outside this place that proclaims to this community: Open Hearts, Open Doors.

My goal is simple...I want us all to be able to drop everything and follow Jesus. That includes the person who has been hurt, who has been shamed, who has been turned away for who they are, for what they have done or for what has been done to them, so that they feel they can now follow Jesus, too.

Folks, we have to start tearing down the barriers that have kept people from knowing the love of Christ in their lives. That starts with you and me making sure that all of those reasons that we started with this morning, the reasons of why people leave church are defeated. So that we all may claim that first-hand knowledge of knowing the love of Christ. We may not have Jesus walking here physically among us but we have this community to live out the Good News of Christ's immense love for all of God's children.

And it is Good News indeed. Amen.