



Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church
Connecting faith with everyday life

Sermon Archives

Date: September 10, 2017

Title: "Follow That Rabbi"

Scripture: Mark 1: 16-20

Description: Jesus chose a gang of school drop-outs to be his disciples. Jesus has always chosen followers from among the not-good-enough, and these followers change the world.

Lost in the major news reports, last week, the city of Houston school system announced that because of the flooding, their school openings would be delayed a week. They're just now starting school? Our kids have been going to school for a month!

A month. If you have a family member in school, chances are you've already experienced your first crisis of the year—the worst teacher in the entire faculty, your dog going on a eats-nothing-but-homework diet, not a single friend on the school bus or in the cafeteria. School is hard.

Now, schools offer something called "K-Camp". It runs Wednesday through Friday, the week before school starts. The purpose of K-Camp is to prepare children for the beginning of kindergarten. You don't just walk in unprepared.

In Israel back in Jesus' day, a boy-child would begin his education at age six. Schools had only one subject. No electives, no athletics or choral departments. No band camp. One thing—teach/learn the Torah. The Torah was the first five books of what we call the Old Testament.

Jewish people believed God spoke directly to their ancestors. *Talk about a nation founded on Godly principles!* Soon after their people had been freed from slavery in Egypt, they were camped at the base of Mt. Sinai when a man named Moses went up to the top of the mountain and received words from God. Not only had God spoken to Moses but God also gave Moses a hard copy of what he said. Torah.

So the core value of the people of Jesus' world was teaching, obeying, and living the Torah. *Sort of like the core value of our world is college football.* At age six, a boy-child would begin his education. The first level of education was called *Bet Sefer*¹ (which means "house of the Book"). All they studied was the torah. This schooling lasted until the student was ten years old. By the time they were ten, they would have memorized the Torah by heart. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Memorized.

This was crucial because there weren't written copies. Sometimes a village would have only one copy of the Torah, and it was a partial copy. Where were the Gideons providing bibles for hotel rooms?

By age ten, the students would have begun to separate themselves out. The top students would go on to the next level of education, which was called *Bet Talmud*. The others would drop out and learn the family business. If your family made sandals or wine or were farmers, you'd learn that skill and be ready to handle the business when it was your generation's time.

The top students, however, continued to study in *Bet Talmud* (which means "House of Learning") and by age 13,14 had the entire scripture memorized. Genesis to Malachi—thirty nine books. Memorized.

I read a blog of a student in Manhattan a few years ago who enrolled in a *yeshiva*—a Jewish seminary. After a couple of months, he realized he was the only student in the school who didn't have the entire OT memorized. Thirty-nine books, Genesis to Malachi, memorized. (In Gwinnett County, kindergarten has been going for a month now. Is your child keeping up?)

At this advanced level of education, students were expected to go beyond memory work. They needed something more than merely grasping the material. Students were judged on their ability to ask questions. Good questions (which are likely to begin with, "This is a dumb question, but...") Good questions reveal an exploring mind in search of meaning, not just someone memorizing facts in order to get a grade. Remember the story of the boy Jesus in the Temple? "They found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them *and asking them questions*. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers." (Luke 2:42) Did Jesus attend a *Bet Talmud* school like the other bright students his age?

The "curriculum" of a *Bet Talmud* school was usually completed by the time the student was age 14 or 15, but by then most students by now had dropped out and were learning the family business and getting married, in other words, making a living.

Some of those remaining students would apply to a well-known rabbit to enter a form of grad school. That level was called *Bet Midrash* ("House of Study") "Rabbi, I want to become one of your disciples." He was asking to take that rabbi's yoke upon him. He didn't merely want to pick the rabbi's brain, he wanted to imitate the rabbi's life. He wanted to do what the rabbi did.

Rabbis were the best, brightest, most respected people in the community. Not everyone could be a rabbi. A Jewish boy-child would dream of being a rabbi the way kids today dream of being LeBron or Steph Currie.

When I was a child, my rabbi was my grandfather. My dad was seldom sober enough to notice me; my mother spent most of her energy holding the family together; but my Grandfather was a wise, spiritual man who, above all, loved me. When I was about three, I announced to the world that when I grew up I was going to be just like my Grandfather: I'd "sit on the porch, smoke my pipe, and spit."

Granddad would indeed spend hours on the porch, a book in his lap, his feet propped on the porch railing, making a vee. When he spat, he could arch the projectile right between his feet, onto Mother's begonias just below. I never mastered the art of spitting. When I spit, I have to lean over and let it dribble down my chin. I tried leaning back and arching a manly projectile, but it reached as far as my knees, so I gave that up pretty early. I didn't want to merely learn from my grandfather; I wanted to be like him.

I may have given up that childish idea as I became an adolescent, but I notice that my favorite place in our house is on the porch. Even now I start most mornings out there, replacing the pipe with a cup of coffee. "It's so muggy out here!" exclaims Debbie. "I know," I reply, "but I like it here." I hadn't thought about it, but I suppose I'm accomplishing a childhood dream: "When I grow up, I want to be like my Granddaddy..."

At the conclusion of a *Bet Talmud* education, the brightest students might request to continue to study with the rabbi, hoping to learn, not more scholarship, but how to become like the rabbi. When the rabbi considered his response, he wanted to know a few things. Can this student do what I do? Can this kid take my yoke upon him? Can this kid be like me? Does this kid have what it takes? He would grill the kid in a tough and personal admission examination.

Ever get a rejection letter in response to a college app? "It is obvious that you love God and the Torah, but your academic record and social profile indicate that you do not meet our stringent requirements." But sometimes there would be a letter of acceptance. The contents would be brief and to the point: "Come, follow me."

"As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen." (Mark 1:16) Why are they fishermen? Because they aren't disciples. They weren't good enough. They didn't make the cut. They were school drop-outs. "And Jesus said to them, "Follow me..." (Mark 1:17) Jesus calls the not-good-enoughs.

So why do I spend so much of my energy trying to appear to be good enough?

What's going on here? Most Christian movies don't help. Jesus is usually wearing a white bathrobe with a light blue beauty contestant sash. He has blow-dried hair, and his eyes gaze towards heaven. And he's Swedish.² He says to these two brothers in the middle of their work day, "Follow me." What's going on?

His invitation is shocking; their response is completely reasonable. A rabbi says, "You can be like me"? Of course you would drop your net too. The rabbi believes you can do what he does. Nobody has ever believed in you like that! He thinks you can be like him! Jesus took some guys who didn't make the cut and changed the course of human history!

This isn't an invitation to be in the advanced class in Vacation Bible School. Jesus and his disciples are going to change the world! Later Jesus talked with them in a place called Caesarea-Philippi. The place is a detail in the Gospel of Mark that's easy to skip. Caesarea-Philippi was the world center of the god Pan. People came from all over the world to worship this god. There is a cliff with a giant crack in it that the followers believed that the spirits from hell would come and go from the earth. This crack was called the Gates of Hell.

The disciples must have been there before—it's only 26 miles from Galilee. Why is Jesus taking them there? "Who do people say that I am?" asks Jesus. "You are the Messiah", answers Peter. It's the first time a human recognizes this great truth. "You're right", cries Jesus, "And the Gates of Hell will not be able to stop us." The Jesus way is going reshape the world, and we will be unstoppable!

You know the story of the disciples riding out a storm at sea and Jesus comes walking by on the water. Peter asks if he can do that, and Jesus says, "Come on." It's a strange story, but not so strange, really. Jesus has already invited Peter to

“follow me”, to be like me. Peter just wants to walk like Jesus was walking. And he does! After awhile, Peter begins to sink; he cries out for help and Jesus picks him up. Jesus says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Who does Peter lose faith in? Not Jesus; Jesus is doing fine. Jesus isn’t even getting his ankles wet!” Peter loses faith in himself. Peter loses faith that he can do what his rabbi is doing.³

Jesus says, “You didn’t choose me, but I chose you.” (That’s very Presbyterian, you know. We are known as “The chosen”.) The entire system of a rabbi choosing disciples was based on the rabbi having faith in his chosen ones. Jesus has an incredibly high view of you people. Jesus believes that people are capable of amazing things.

I have been told that I need to believe in Jesus. Which is a good thing. But what I am learning is that Jesus believes in me. And that is far more important. I have been told that I need to have faith in God. Which is a good thing. But what I am learning is that God has faith in me.

This rabbi thinks that we can be like him.

1. This came from a wonderful website, www.followtherabbi.com. I recommend it.
2. Much of this sermon comes from *Velvet Elvis* by Rob Bell, published by Zondervan. This particular section is a direct quote.
3. Same as above.