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Speaker: Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor
Scripture: Come Follow Me-Matthew 4:18-22

Have you ever been in a situation when you had someone say to you, follow me? *Come on, it's okay, follow me.* In some cases, you are comfortable with it because you know that person has gained a little credibility and you are assured that they are trustworthy to be followed. They will take you some place that is good.

But, it is those other times when that person is requesting your allegiance and you are not so sure they know what they are doing or where they are going. That can lead to some awkward moments for sure. Has that been your experience?

Last weekend, Carolyn and I and our friends, Terry and Ruth, embarked on a biking adventure. Biking is something Carolyn and I enjoy doing but I would not say that we were hard core but this trip was going to challenge us. It would challenge us physically and test the strength of our relationship and the relationship with our friends, Terry and Ruth. A while back, Carolyn and Ruth had discovered something called the Simcoe Trail Loop and they thought this would be a fun activity to tackle as couples. This trail is a 160-kilometer biking loop through off-road paths and old railway lines. It takes you through beautiful landscape and farm fields and along the shores of Lake Simcoe and Georgian Bay. It connects Midland, Barrie and Orillia.

The thought was that we would make a mini vacation of it and travel this loop over the course of three days. That way, we broke the 160 kms up into about 50 or 60 kms each day. The first day, we would bike from Midland to Barrie. The second day was Barrie to Orillia and the third and final day would take us from Orillia back to Midland. It

seemed doable even for someone like me who isn't actually the picture of physical fitness but for sure it would be a defining moment. They would either be calling an ambulance for me out on a trail in the middle of nowhere or I would have success and make it around the loop.

The first day started well. We arrived in Midland the night before. We got a good rest and then set off for Barrie. We knew this would be the longest stretch of the loop and wanted to get it done while our legs and bottoms were still fresh. The ladies were content to have Terry and I lead the way as they chatted behind us and everything was going great until we hit Elmvale, about the half way point.

We decided to take a break in this quaint, little town. There was a famous natural water spring close by that I was interested in seeing and a small farmers market was selling butter tarts, so naturally we needed an energy boost. My desire to see the spring was voted down because it was a km out of the way and deemed a waste of time and energy. When it came time for us to get back on the trail however, we had a differing of opinion of what direction we needed to go. Without being too specific, let's just say that one of us took charge and beckoned everyone else to, *follow me.* And everyone followed even if, they weren't 100% positive that he knew where he was going.

Well, he didn't know where he was going and the group shouldn't have followed him, but lesson learned with a cost of adding about 5 extra kilometres to our day.

Once back on the trail and now headed in the right direction, we were able to laugh it off but here is the

thing, the group was still following the same people. The ones who got us lost were still leading the pack.

Which of course, led to the second time we got lost. We were nearing Barrie. By now, we were stopping more frequently for drinks of water and to check our bearings. The clue that something was wrong should have been when we checked google maps and found that we were 14 kilometres and 52 minutes from Barrie but when we checked it again 15 minutes later, we were still 14 kilometres and 52 minutes from Barrie. Still, we kept going in the same direction, following our leaders. Until finally, one of the women in the back spoke up. *We're lost!*

As Terry and I scrambled to look at the map to see where we had gone wrong this time, Ruth beckoned us, *follow me*, as she took off on her bike following the robotic voice of her Google maps app. In no position to question her given our track record, we obediently tailed behind her as she led us to a point marked, Nine Mile Heritage Portage Trail.

The sign pointed us in the direction of a wooden board walk stretched across a swamp that drastically narrowed the further along you went. Undeterred by the potential of crocodile or snake attack, Ruth stoically led on through the swamp. My confession to you is that I think I uttered a curse word under my breath as I blindly followed behind her.

At the end of the boardwalk, we were out of the swamp but in the midst of a very dense forest and before us were a series of hills with a faint trail. So, up and down we went following the trail, pushing our bikes as we listened to Ruth's increasingly annoying google voice mocking us as went along.

Remember, we had now biked about 60 km to this point. After about 1 ½ km on this Portage trail, we heard traffic and saw a road through a clearing. It was the road that would eventually lead us into Barrie. It ended up being Ruth and Carolyn who led us out of our mess and safely to our lodging for that night.

They proved to be a little more reliable, when it came to, *follow me*. For Terry and I, we were responsible for turning what should have been a 60 km day, into one that was well over 80 kms. Men and their maps.

I will say, that we redeemed ourselves over the next two days and were able to safely navigate everyone back to Midland.

Follow me, what do those words mean to you?

Well, it is hard to believe that summer is coming to a close. We are in the final few weeks of a summer message series at North Park, that we entitled, ***In the Moment. Decisions that Change our Lives Forever.***

Remember, a defining moment occurs when we are confronted with a situation or circumstance that has the potential to impact the way that we live. It demands that we make a decision that, regardless of the choice we make, it changes us. We have many defining moments in life. Marriages, graduations, births and deaths are a few examples. Have you experienced a defining moment in your life this summer?

The bible is filled with examples of defining moments in the lives of people. The consequences of the choices they make in these defining moments, sometimes drew these people closer to God and sometimes moved them farther away. Throughout the summer, we have pondered some examples from scripture of people who had defining moments in their faith journey. Those include, David, Moses, the woman at the well, Jehosheba, Esther and the Rich Young Ruler.

We have also had a chance to hear some stories of those in our community who have faced defining moment decisions and the way that God was with them through those important times.

Our prayer throughout this series has been that as we consider these examples, that our defining moments in life will be ones that draw us closer to Jesus rather than away. Today we come to another familiar story in the gospels. As you may have guessed, it is about *following*. Let me set the scene for you before we jump into the text.

It is still very early in the story. Jesus has just been baptized and tempted by Satan in the desert and has just begun his earthly ministry and at this point where we pick up the story in the bible, it says he is preaching by the shore of the sea of Galilee, sharing the word of God and crowds are gathering and people are amazed by his teaching!

Whatever he is doing, whether it is the content of the message that he is proclaiming or the way that he is doing it, it is attracting people. It is meeting a need. People are beginning to be drawn to it. A crowd is gathering. Can you put yourself in the scene? Who do you think would have been in the crowd around Jesus on this day? We have some clues. He is by a lake, not in the synagogue. Jesus has ventured outside and is by a lake so we can assume that the crowd is made up mostly of people that would be by a lake during the day. Fishermen, families of fishermen helping with the catch and vendors who sell the fish. Generally, it would have been the lower, working class people in this culture.

There would have been some Pharisees, the religious elite beginning to lurk around Jesus but this crowd would have been mostly working class of this community and it says that the message Jesus was proclaiming was appealing to them. They crowded around Jesus to hear what he had to say. Why?

Just think of a message or teaching that draws a crowd today. In schools, universities, colleges and churches. Isn't it the teacher that makes the content come to life that draws a crowded classroom? His or her teaching actually applies to real life? People feel that the content has a purpose.

When I think back on some of the teachers I have had in my life, the ones who really stand out and I learned the most from had a real passion for what they were teaching. You can sense a teacher that is just going through the motions and one who truly believes in what they are teaching. Their teaching is contagious, isn't it? Has that been your experience?

Crowds were gathering around Jesus as he taught. Perhaps it was his style, his humour, his personal examples or parables but probably more significantly, it was the content of his teaching and the fact that he actually believes in what he is saying. It was touching a nerve and meeting a need. It was giving those who gathered hope that Jesus was ushering in a new and better day than they had had to endure under Roman Rule.

In fact, Jesus' teaching was so profound that people referred to him as *Rabbi*, a title that was reserved for the most esteemed and learned religious leaders in this day.

So let me recap. Here we have Jesus, in the early days of his ministry, already gaining a reputation as one who taught with authority. Crowds are gathering around him as he preaches by the Sea of Galilee to an audience made up of mostly those in the lower strata of society, fishermen and their families. Are you with me?

That is the scene as we turn to Matthew 4:18-22. That is important to understand as we come to a defining moment in the lives of four men that Jesus is about to encounter. Listen as I read,

Matthew 4:18-22

One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers—Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew—throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. ¹⁹ Jesus called out to them, “Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” ²⁰ And they left their nets at once and followed him. ²¹ A little farther up the shore he saw two other brothers, James and John, sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, repairing their nets. And he called them to come, too. ²² They immediately followed him, leaving the boat and their father behind.

So, what is it that stands out for you in the text? For me, no matter how many times I have read these verses I am still captivated by Peter and Andrew and then James and John's response to Jesus' invitation to follow him. Look at it again in *Matthew 4:19-20*, Peter and Andrew are in the midst of throwing a net into the water. They are “on the job” as fishermen and Jesus strolls by with an invitation,

Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” And they left their nets at once and followed him.

A few minutes later, James and John, “on the job” sitting in a boat repairing a fishing net with their dad and Jesus extends to them the same invitation. Their response?

Matthew 4:22

They immediately followed him, leaving the boat and their father behind.

The author of this gospel Matthew emphasizes the speed with which these guys put down their work to follow Jesus. Peter and Andrew abandoned their nets in mid-cast and the departure of James and John was just as abrupt. One minute they were mending nets under the watchful eye of their father Zebedee and the next minute they were off to follow Jesus. Can you just picture Zebedee reaction? *Where are you going?* This was the family business. He needed his sons.

Is that your reaction when someone asks you to follow them? When Ruth took the lead on our bike trip and started off down that swampy boardwalk off the beaten track, I thought to myself, *I ain't going*. Not down there. She's on her own. I took a drink of water and pondered my options. Then I very hesitantly and with much doubt and reservation, followed along. It ended up being a pretty good decision.

For these four guys in the text, there was no doubt. They literally gave up everything in that moment to follow Jesus. It was a defining moment that changed their lives forever and as we know the rest of the story, Jesus used them to change the world. So why did they do it? What was it that made them drop everything to follow Jesus? It is not like they had 2000 years of history with Jesus like we do today. They probably had only been around and seen Jesus in action for a matter of days. There is something deeper going on here.

They left everything and followed him.

The word *followed* in the original language literally means to come after or to *walk the same road*. To follow Jesus is to walk the same road with him. To follow in his footsteps. To follow someone in this day meant way more than simply job shadowing someone or apprenticing in a workplace. To follow in this sense means that you want to give your life to what the person you are following has given their life to. You want to become what they have become. You want to be like them. You want to be their disciple.

Do you know what a disciple is because we throw that word around a lot in the church, don't we? Many of us would probably say that a disciple is a follower of Jesus Christ and we would be partially right but it is much richer than that. Do you mind if

I take a few moments to explain what being a disciple would have meant in Jesus' day? It is important to grasp why these four guys were so quick to respond to Jesus invitation to follow him. Stay with me because this is good.

In the first century world in which Jesus lived, the Jewish people believed that God had spoken to Moses centuries before and gave him the first five books of the bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It was known as the Torah, which meant the teaching or the law. It was to be the foundation for how they lived their lives and their education system.

At around the age of 5-6, Jewish children would attend school in the local synagogue and be taught by the rabbi until the age of around 10. In this time, most of the children would have memorized the entire Torah. That's right, they would know Genesis through to Deuteronomy by heart. You thought putting John 3:16 to memory was a big deal!

After this, many of the children would leave school and begin to learn a trade or help out around the home. The best of the best students, those with the straight A's, would move on to the next level of education. For the next four years, they would, among other things, memorize the entire Hebrew Scriptures. That's right, they would have the entire Old Testament memorized. You think knowing the Lord's Prayer by heart is something!

At the age of 14-15, many of these students would now leave school to learn a trade or work in the family business but the best of the best of these students, the academic elite, could apply to be a disciple of a famous Rabbi of the day.

A disciple meaning, that they wanted to be like that rabbi and do what that particular rabbi does. See in this day, all of the Rabbi's had studied the same scriptures and Jewish laws but each one had a particular way in which they interpreted them, this was called their *Yoke*. The way the Rabbi interpreted the scriptures and law and taught it, was called their *yoke*.

That is what Jesus was getting at in that familiar passage of scripture where he says to those gathered around him,

Matthew 11:28-29

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you.

My yoke that Jesus as a rabbi is referring to here is his teachings. He is telling those gathered around him that they will find rest when they follow his teachings, his yoke.

Back to my explanation. When one of these elite students applied to be a disciple of a famous Rabbi, that Rabbi, would interview and grill that student on how well he knew that Rabbi’s yoke. How well they knew his teachings. Through this process, like an intense job interview, the Rabbi could discern whether that student had what it took to follow him. To sit at his feet and learn from him and to carry his yoke, and then teach it to other people. In other words, does that student have what it takes to be the best of the best of the best?

If the Rabbi concluded that the student did, he would invite him formally with the words, *come and follow me*. At 14-15 years of age, the student, now a disciple would leave everything, his family, his friends, and his town and devote his life to following the Rabbi wherever he went. The disciples would be passionately devoted to their Rabbi and make note of everything they said and did so they could imitate and become like him. After spending significant time as a disciple, the student could then ascend to the position of a Rabbi, themselves and begin his ministry at around the age of 30.

Do you see why it is so important to understand this back story to a deeper sense of what is going on in *Matthew 4*? Jesus has just begun his ministry as a rabbi. He is around 30 years old and he is walking along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He spots Peter and Andrew first and he says, *Come, follow me*. Why did they jump at the chance right away?

Remember, they would have probably been in their late teens and they were fishing. Which meant that they were not following another rabbi. Which meant that they were not the elite students. They were not the best of the best. Rabbis were among the most honoured and revered people in this culture. They were the cream of the crop. The top students lined up to beg to follow a respected rabbi.

When a rabbi said, *Come, follow me*, to these students, he was saying to them, *I see something in you. I think you can be like me. I believe in you to follow my teaching, my yoke and to share it with others.*

But Peter and Andrew, James and John, they were not top students. They were lowly fishermen. They probably dropped out of school after the first level, content to take up the family business. They were not expecting much more from their lives. Can you imagine what they felt when Jesus, a respected and increasingly popular rabbi not only wanders past them, not only speaks to them, but actually extends an invitation to them, *Come, follow me*. They were nobodies, but Jesus sees something in them.

Do you know what it would be like? It would be like you were shooting some hoops in your driveway and Nick Nurse, the coach of the NBA Champion Toronto Raptors happened to be driving by and said to you, *hey I see something in you. Follow me. I want to personally coach you to be an NBA basketball player*. Wouldn’t you drop everything to follow him?

Or your walking down the street, singing along to the music playing in your ear buds and a limo pulls up and out pops Drake, and he says, *hey you sound pretty good. I think you can be like me. Come follow me and I will be your voice coach*. Wouldn’t you drop everything and follow him?

Or you are sitting in a business class at school and Oprah Winfrey happens to be walking by the door when she suddenly stops and calls out to you, *hey, I see something in you. I want you teach you everything I know so that you can take over my entire business conglomerate, my brand. Come follow me*. Wouldn’t you drop everything to follow her?

You get the idea. This was a big deal. In this culture and I would suggest even in our culture today, usually it is the students who beg for a chance to prove themselves to their teacher but here Jesus flips it all around. He is the one who does the asking. Besides these four fishermen in this text, Jesus went on to ask 8 other nobodies including tax collectors, farmers and tradesmen to follow him and in that defining moment, they said *yes*. These 12 disciples devoted the next three years of their lives to learning the yoke of Jesus and trying to be like him and we know the rest of the story, don’t we?

Despite their occasional failings and ineptness, through their devotion to Jesus and under the power of the Holy Spirit, these disciples went on to change the course of human history.

Here's the thing. Unlike the first century world in which Jesus lived and even our world today where it seems like only the elite or gifted ones are given the opportunities, Jesus instead chose the regular, ordinary person to be his disciple because his teachings, his yoke and the way of life of a Christian is for everyone. It is for the rich and the poor, the young and old, male and female, educated and uneducated, the anybodies and the nobodies, the elite and the not good enoughs. Jesus issues an invitation to everyone, *come follow me*.

Remember what he said in,

Matthew 11:28-29

"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you.

Remember, a rabbi would not invite someone to follow him unless he thought that that person can be like him. Isn't it amazing that Jesus believes in us! He wants us to be his disciples. To follow his teachings and then he commands us to share what we learn through our words and actions, with all we come in contact with. That is what he commands his followers in,

Matthew 28:19-20

Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

See, not only are we called to have faith in Jesus, but we have to remember, that Jesus also has faith in us. That is what he demonstrated when he called out to Peter, Andrew, James and John. He believed that they had what it took to follow him. He believes that we have what it takes, too. Jesus believes in each one of us. He has left this, the world, in our hands. Oh, he hasn't left us alone. We have his presence with us through his spirit which will guide us as we carry out the mission to share his love and hope with everyone. To make more disciples of Jesus.

So let me ask you, have you made the defining moment decision to follow Jesus? He has extended the same invitation to you as he did those four fishermen in Matthew 4, *come Follow me*. This story reminds us that there are no excuses.

We can no longer say, *I am not good enough to follow Jesus. I am not holy enough. I don't know enough about the bible. I haven't got one verse of the bible memorized let alone the entire Old Testament*.

It doesn't matter. Jesus believes in you. He will give us all that we need but we need to make a decision, are we in or are we out. Will we follow him or will we not?

Can you image? Can you image if we all surrendered our lives to Him? If we dropped our nets at once like Peter, Andrew, James and John.

Image if we took off our limits and conditions that we have placed on our commitment to follow Jesus, *oh maybe tomorrow I will follow you Lord, or maybe when the kids grow up or I know a bit more of the bible*. Image if we took those limits and conditions off and instead, surrendered ourselves fully to him and his teachings with a desire to be his disciples. To be like him.

Can you imagine the impact that would have on our world, today? If we all worshipped God with overflowing hearts, gathering in community as the church and giving generously of our time, gifts and money. Imagine if we extended grace to a broken world and went out into the world to share the teaching, the yoke of Jesus with everyone. Can you imagine? It would change us, our families, our neighbourhoods, our cities and the world.

That is my prayer for you and for me, and for this church. That Jesus' invitation to all of us, *follow me*, would be a defining moment in our lives and we would respond with an immediate and a resounding, *yes* to faithfully go wherever he leads us.

Scripture tells us that we are fearfully, wonderfully and excellently made and Jesus wants to use us for his mission to the world. So how do we respond? Yes? No? Maybe?

Are you finally ready to drop everything and make Jesus the number one priority of our life because when he becomes the number one priority, it changes everything? It reorients our schedule, our

job, our relationships, our outlook on money and things and our view of the world. It changes everything. Has that been your experience?

Do you know that biking trip Carolyn and I went on a few weeks ago with our friends? For most of the trip we were biking along old railway lines with paths made of crushed gravel. At times it was hot and dusty. At the end of each day when I took my shoes and socks off, I noticed a ring of dust just above my sock line on my shins. The result of the times each day, when I would follow behind the lead biker. They would stir up the dust and because I was following so closely, it would settle on me.

In Jesus' day, rabbis would travel from town to town followed closely behind by their pack of disciples. At that time, there were no paved roads. Some were made of stone but most were dirt paths and as the Rabbi walked ahead leading the pack, the dirt and dust that he stirred up would be caked on the disciples following closely behind. A saying began at that time, *may you be covered by the dust of your rabbi*, meaning may who your rabbi is, be who you are as well. May where he goes, be where you go as well and may his life and his teachings be caked on you like dust because you are following so closely in his footsteps.

Jesus has faith that we can follow him and that we can be like him. May we believe in him, but may we also come to see that he believes in us. And, may we follow him so closely and so faithfully, that we will, be covered by the dust of our rabbi.

Amen? Amen.

In the Moment

Decisions that Change our lives Forever

Come Follow Me – Matthew 4: 18-22

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Have you ever been in a situation when someone said, *follow me*? How did you respond? If you didn't follow, why not? If you did follow, did it lead you somewhere good and productive?
2. What type of person would you refuse to follow? Why? What type of person would you have no problem following? Why?
3. Compare the best teacher you have ever had with the worst one. What were the differences between these two teachers? What were the qualities that made the best teacher so effective?
4. Have you ever had to job shadow or apprentice with someone? What did that require you to do?
5. Have you responded to Jesus' invitation to, *Come, follow me*? When and why did you choose to follow Jesus? Have you dropped everything to follow him like Peter, Andrew, James and John? Is Jesus your number one priority or are there still some things you are holding on to? What are they and why are you still holding on to them?
6. What does it mean to you, to be a disciple of Jesus?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. If you have never fully surrendered everything to follow Jesus, make it a defining moment prayer to him this week. If you know there are some things that you are placing in a higher priority than your relationship with Jesus, surrender those in prayer.