

January 25, 2015

TEXT: Mark 1

TITLE: Saying Yes

The video clip opens with one man dancing on a grassy hillside. His movements are big, free, eye-catching. Everyone can see him—frankly, *you can't miss him*. But everyone is sitting on their blankets on this sunny day, listening to the concert below. Then along comes his first follower. Another man joins in, participating in the same, uninhibited dance on the hillside. The dance leader includes him, and soon the first follower is waving his friends over. In just a few seconds, two more people join in. Then four more. In less than three minutes the whole crowd starts running over to dance because by now, it is clear, *that's* the place to be. So many people are dancing that it's not the risky choice anymore. So many people are dancing that others want to join in too. By the three-minute mark, *hundreds* have joined the dance.

This, says entrepreneur and musician Derek Sivers, is how a movement begins. It starts with a leader, someone who is willing to stand out and go against the grain. The leader is willing to be ridiculed, but that doesn't stop him or her. The leader does something that is easy to follow. It might be bold or daring or unconventional—but others can notice and join in. And then comes the first follower. Sivers says:

“So here's his first follower with a crucial role; he's going to show everyone else how to follow... So now it's not about the leader anymore; it's about *them*, plural... the first follower is actually an underestimated form of leadership in itself. It takes guts to stand out like that. The first follower is what transforms a lone nut into a leader.”¹

Our biblical text for this morning shows us in less than 10 verses how Jesus started a movement. Like Sivers' video, this text makes it all sound so easy. John the Baptist has been arrested, and so Jesus—fresh from his trial in the wilderness—picks up the mantle of proclamation, and begins to preach a gospel of repentance. “The kingdom of God is at hand,” he says. “Repent and turn to God.”

As Jesus walks along the seashore one day, his ministry is radically transformed. With just a one-sentence invitation, Jesus calls four disciples to his side. “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” And they do. They leave everything they know, dropping their nets where they were, and become Jesus' first followers. Jesus' ministry is no longer a one man dance. He has others by his side—his ministry is becoming a movement.

¹ <http://genius.com/Derek-sivers-how-to-start-a-movement-annotated>

And while Jesus is the initiator of the invitation—while inviting others to join was all his idea—there is something impressive about these first disciples who were so caught up in Jesus' simple welcome that they dropped everything to be followers. Perhaps it is, as Siverson suggests, because it is not the leader but the first followers who show everyone else how to follow. They are the ones who set the example for the rest of us—they set the stage for everyone else. They are the leaders of the rest of the followers. And as much as we want to follow Jesus, we know we can't BE him—this God who became flesh. And maybe we can't even be like him.

But we can, simply, follow him.

When we look at these disciples, we see so much. On one hand we see a story of ordinary men doing extraordinary things under the leadership of their teacher, our Savior, Jesus. We know that these hardworking, illiterate, imperfect laborers become *miracle workers, forgivers, and preachers too*. We know that these first followers are imperfect people—*just like us*—and we see throughout the larger story that even in the midst of their imperfection they are accepted and loved by Christ, and through them God does amazing things.

But in this text *already* we see the extraordinary. We see four people giving up everything for the unknown. We see for people risking everything—their livelihoods, their families, their futures—to answer one invitation to follow. The text is clear: they didn't deliberate or debate. They didn't run home to check with their wives. James and John didn't consult with their father who was out on the boat with them that day. *Immediately*. They followed Jesus immediately.

Is this the example that we are to follow? Do we need to drop everything in order to follow Jesus? What about our responsibilities? The people who depend on us? What are we supposed to do?

Most of us are like Moses and Jeremiah—only willing to follow after a great debate with God to work out the kinks of our call. We need to articulate our uncertainty and make sure that the proper contingencies are in place. Some of us may be like Jonah, who, in spite of his great success as the prophet to Ninevah, first ran from his call. God told him to go east and he went west boldly trying to avoid the work to which he was called.

Following Jesus doesn't always come so easily to us. Our schedules are full. Our responsibilities are many. And frankly, with our cell phones constantly by our sides, we are well aware that Jesus just isn't the only one calling. My niece texted me at 4 AM this morning. She lives in Ireland, and didn't recognize the time difference when she wrote. She wrote to congratulate me, as our text history was the longest she had in the one month since she got her iPod touch. Sixty one messages, including her 4 AM text. We are on demand—some of us 24/7—and it's hard enough to find the time to make sure that the dishes stacked in the

sink are washed before we go to bed, that it seems even harder to find the time to be a part of Jesus' revolutionary movement, to leave behind the life we've known and turn and follow him. It's just too hard.

Or is it?

See, the disciples knew that their choice to answer Christ's call was a simple matter of saying yes. But, as their story shows, they knew that saying yes to Christ meant saying no to something else. To travel with Jesus, they left behind their jobs, knowing that they could not continue to catch fish if they were out catching people with Jesus. They stepped away from their families, knowing that they couldn't stay put in Galilee if they were going to travel with Jesus and minister to people everywhere. It was simple: to say yes to Jesus, they had to say no to that which kept them from answering his call—or at least they had to say no to their old way of doing things.

The same is true for us. Every time say yes, we are also saying a silent no to something else. When we say yes to a marriage proposal, we are saying no to romance with anyone else (ideally!). When we say yes to a filet mignon dinner, we are saying no to the chicken parmesan. When we say yes to our first choice college, we are saying no to the other schools that sent us an acceptance letter in the mail. Each yes has in its wake a series of no's.

Our call, as followers of Jesus, is to say yes to that which draws us closer to Christ, and to say no to that which stands in our way from living the life to which he calls us.

Sometimes, like the disciples, this looks like a vocational shift. It might mean discerning to further our education, to shift workplaces, to try something altogether new. For others it might mean a shift in our state of mind—surrendering attitudes that foster greed and nurturing a posture of gratitude. Some of us might simply feel called to step out of our comfort zones—to make a friend who is radically different from us, to accept someone we might not understand, to speak up when we witness an injustice rather than silently holding our objection in our heart. Others of us might need to be disciplined with our time—to say no to some of the demands on our attention and energy, to make sure that we have the room in our schedules to nurture our love for God and for our neighbors.

Thomas Merton says: "Each individual Christian and each new age of the Church has to make this rediscovery, this return to the source of Christian life. It demands a fundamental act of renunciation that accepts the necessity of starting out on the way to God under the guidance of other men."²

² Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. P 145.

The hard part is finding the time to listen, so we know when it's really Christ calling. And the other hard part is to let go of our old way of life, willing to step into the new life to which Christ calls us.

But we have hope, for, you see, the practices of our faith are learned in community: The openness to hearing a call and the courage to answer. The hope that fuels our "yeses," and the wisdom that infuses our no's. These gifts are nurtured in community—where we learn to follow from other followers; and where we share our experiences so that we might lead others.

Sivers' advice is this: "As we're told that we should all be leaders that would be really ineffective. If you really care about starting a movement, have the courage to follow and show others how to follow."

May we have the courage to follow the living Christ—the one who calls to us from our offices and kitchens and buses each day. May we say yes when he invites us to follow. May we say yes to his extension of life-saving love, and may we say yes to his call to love others in his name. And may we, as Christ's disciples, show others how to follow him too. Amen.