

### “Essential Personnel”

We've managed to avoid it so far this winter but eventually we're gonna get hit with that big Blizzard that can bring things to a decisive halt. Schools close. Events are canceled. Travel becomes tricky. If the conditions become severe enough, the decision may be made that not everybody should try to get to work. Only those who are absolutely necessary should report. For those occasions we have coined an interesting phrase to describe these people upon whom we depend so much. This phrase sends some people out into the cold to scrape ice off their windshields while others return to the warmth of their beds. This phrase compels some to slip and slide to work at all costs while others do nothing more than watch Columbo and Love Boat reruns on television. Even in areas where it rarely snows, the phrase is a familiar one. When budget talks collapse and the government shuts down, this is the phrase that is trotted out. When the earth suddenly moves under the people of California, often a certain group of people are called out while the rest are told to stay at home. When tornadoes blow through the Southwest and disrupt everything in their course, only certain people should risk the dangers involved. These are maintenance people, road crews, ambulance drivers, fire fighters, electric and gas company workers, truck drivers, and a whole host of service people who are taken for granted when things are running smoothly. We call them "Essential Personnel."

Think about that phrase. Think about what it means to be essential personnel. Then, if you want to be humbled, think about what it is like to be non-essential personnel. Consider the fact that the world can go on without some of us. The good news is that we are all, or at least all can be, Essential Personnel. We are called to be a special group of people and to do some important things. In this passage from Matthew, Jesus called some ordinary fishermen to do the work of kingdom-building. Jesus calls ordinary people like you and me to love and serve. And, as in the case of these fishermen, many times we do not need to learn new skills or receive extensive training. Jesus said, “You fishermen have been casting your nets into the sea.

Follow me, and you will fish for people.” And they did!

They were fishermen before, they were fishermen afterwards, but with Jesus the focus and priorities changed. Jesus says to us, "Follow me. You are essential personnel. Come just as you are. Bring whatever gifts and talents you have and use them in my name. Bring your excitement and enthusiasm and I will channel them in the right direction. Bring your commitment and I will show you a place where you can make a difference. Bring your love and hope and watch them change lives."

Jesus' disciples were not a panel of experts. Jesus took people that the world had labeled in many ways non-essential - fishermen, tax collectors, notorious sinners, women who were

never considered essential before and used them and their gifts in doing the work of love and issuing the call to others to follow in the way of Jesus. People who before, never felt wanted found a place. People who doubted the world even knew they existed were suddenly essential personnel.

You and I have been made essential personnel, not by our own merit, but because of a "Follow me" we once heard that included us, and accepted us, and affirmed us. Most of us have heard that voice and those words somewhere along the way. Maybe it was the minister who told us she thought we would be good working with the youth. Or perhaps a Sunday school teacher who encouraged us to consider ministry. Maybe the person who sits in front of us at church said we would be great in the choir. Or the church council endorsed our idea to help the needy in the community. Some scripture pointed to an area of our lives in which we could grow in our understanding and service. It happens in many different ways, so do not be surprised if you hear those words, too. "Follow Me!"

Jesus said, "Follow me," and the exciting thing is that they did. Simon and Andrew, James and John decided to follow Jesus, but they weren't the only ones. All kinds of people responded. Not everybody decided to follow Jesus, but a lot did. From Simon and Andrew to us, women and men, young and aging, people of all colors and classes, have heard that invitation in the places where they live their lives. In fact, Jesus could not stop saying, "Follow me."

It is one thing to ask some fishermen to come along for a stroll along the Sea of Galilee, but it is another proposition altogether to utter those words "Follow me" so freely, almost carelessly, and think that anybody might answer. We know God loves everybody, but just because God loves everybody does not mean everybody is going to follow around after Jesus. Nor does the fact that God loves everybody mean that we want to see all of them in the crowd with Jesus, and with us.

Every time Jesus says, "Follow me," it affects us. We don't mind Jesus trying to help the prostitute build some self-esteem, but that doesn't mean we want to be sitting next to her in church. We aren't bothered by Jesus spending time with the mentally ill, but that doesn't translate into our own willingness to be more tolerant of that horrible disease. We are glad to see Jesus healing the sick, those who are on death's door, but that doesn't mean we want the house in our neighborhood converted into a shelter for AIDS patients. We sort of like the idea of Jesus letting children sit in his lap, but that is a long way from appreciating the gifts and presence of children and overlooking the messes created in their celebrations. When Jesus bypasses the church on his way to eat at the house of the most disgusting person in town we are a little miffed, but not nearly as miffed as when Jesus holds that person up as a better model of faith than us. Suddenly, our excitement over being claimed as essential personnel, people that we would like to think God cannot do without, is tempered by the presence of people who all our lives we have not only shunned, but tried our very best not to be like.

Right out in public where people came to draw water, Jesus was seen talking to a Samaritan woman who had been married five times, and now was living with another man. Instead of Jesus condemning her, he said, "Here, have a sip of this living water." One day Jesus came upon a woman caught in adultery who was receiving her just punishment. Jesus not only sent the self-appointed jury away, he let the woman go, too. "Neither do I condemn you, so go your way and sin no more." At the most crucial moment Peter denied knowing and following Jesus, so what did Jesus have to say to him later? "Follow me!" And he did!

The temptation is to think that Jesus used exceptional insight when he looked our way and said, "Follow me." It is even a greater temptation to wonder what in the world he was thinking about when he called some of these others? But that's not Jesus' problem. That's our problem! And Jesus isn't going to give us an explanation. Too often we want to measure our faithfulness against that of everyone else. When it comes to financial giving, I might try and validate myself by saying I know I give more than say, 70% of the rest of the congregation. But what I should be asking is, do I give as much as God would want me to give? Sure I bought a sandwich for the homeless person downtown and even went on a Food Run to feed about 300 Homeless people, twice. But I've lost count of how many people I just walked by "pretending" that I didn't hear their request. Yes, I've helped a lot of people who asked for help. But Jesus has said "Follow Me!" Have I helped as many people as God would have wanted me to help?

Jesus doesn't just say "Follow Me" on the day of our Baptism, like he has today with Brian Michael & Lilah Morgan. Jesus says "Follow Me" each time we have an opportunity to do a caring, loving act in the name of Christ our Lord. Today we are getting ready to have our Annual Congregational Meeting. Although we tend to get bogged down on the Budget our main goal is to respond to Jesus' call to "Follow Me!" The Budget makes it possible to do that in many ways, but before we pat ourselves on the back because of all the people we have helped, and there are many. We need to ask ourselves if we have given as much as we could, shared as much as we could, loved as much as we could, cared as much as we could? As faithful as we have been to answer the call of "Follow Me" - are we being as faithful as we should be in Sharing the life, love, and joy of Jesus Christ with others?

Jesus is telling us that we are "Essential Personnel!" Not because God is blessing what we are doing, but because we are blessed by being involved in what God is doing! Way back in Biblical times Jesus said to Simon and Andrew - "Follow Me!" and he has been saying it to everyone since, and is still saying "Follow Me to us today. The question is - will we? Amen