

Sermon: February 6, 2022

Christ Church Dartmouth

Epiphany 5

Rev. Dr. Kyle Wagner

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8, (9-13) • Psalm 138 • 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 • Luke 5:1-11

Just picture it. I was blessed enough to see the location during a trip to Israel. Imagine the small indentations along the shore of the lake of Gennesaret, the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. This shore is a natural gathering place, the area slopes slightly toward the edge of the water. The rising ground behind provides an echo chamber for the voice. Jesus is speaking from a slight distance; the few yards between him and the crowd help carry his preaching, his words, and message clearly. At this time, Jesus was of curiosity to the community; the crowd was pushing in on him. As he looked up, he sees two boats tied up. The fishermen were cleaning their nets. He leaves the shore and gets into Simon's boat, telling him to put out more to sea. From there, he continues to preach and teach. When he concludes his words, he says to Simon, "Push out into deep water my friend and let your nets out for a catch." We know what happens, don't we? The haul of fish was more than Simon's crew could handle. The boat was tipping.

It was filled so much. Simon, in awe, falls to his knees, saying, “Master, leave. I’m a sinner and can’t handle this holiness. Leave me to myself.” Jesus responds, “There is nothing to fear. From now on, you’ll be fishing for men and women.” They pulled their boats up on the beach, left them, nets and all, and followed him.

What a dramatic story of following. To follow is: “go or come after (a person or thing proceeding ahead); move or travel behind.” As a child, my mother would always ask me: Are you going to be a follower or a leader? I most often answered “leader,” I’m not sure why. Lately, I have been doing a lot of unfollowing. In 2022 you can follow someone on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Tik Tok. You can see their inspirational quotes, the meal they ate last night, the workout they do that looks impossible, and of course, their views on a variety of things.

I like many Canadians, have felt a divide in our country this week. It starts with the “Freedom Convoy of 2022” and ends with the ousting of Conservative Party of Canada Leader Erin O’Toole. The GoFundMe page for the convoy has been suspended for further review as the convoy has kept our nations’ capital hostage. The reason for the convoy the organizers said:

“the time for political over reach is over. Our current government is implementing rules and mandates that are destroying the foundation of our businesses, industries and livelihoods. We are a peaceful country...and we are taking our fight to the doorsteps of our Federal Government and demanding that they cease all mandates against its people. It’s our duty as Canadians to put an end to this mandates. It is imperative that this happens because if we don’t We are doing this for our future Generations and to regain our lives back.

To date, \$7.9 million dollars has been raised.

This convoy to end vaccination mandates has morphed from a campaign of change to something more sinister. A gathering of Canadians were some in attendance fly the Nazi Swastika, the confederate flag and the Gadsden Flag of the Carolinas, the “don't tread on me” flag. The very definition of a convoy is “a group of ships or vehicles travelling together, typically accompanied by armed troops, warships, or other vehicles for protection.” Notice this gathering is not called "Freedom Protest."

I see a need for peaceful protest, but from my viewpoint, this isn’t. One Ottawa homeless shelter reported that protesters from the "Freedom Convoy" harassed their staff and volunteers, demanding food from their soup kitchen, and one shelter client was allegedly assaulted. They reported,

"Earlier today, our staff and volunteers experienced harassment from convoy protestors seeking meals from our soup kitchen...Staff and volunteers were verbally harassed by people who came to the kitchen

looking for meals. We also had a situation where the trucks were blocking our drop-off in front the shelter, which is where police and paramedics come to bring people to us for care," she said. "That was blocked and that could have cost somebody a life."

A dear friend, a mentor, and someone I follow for he models Christ is The Rev. John Perkin, pastor of First Baptist Ottawa: He shared his experience this week:

Here in Ottawa we all probably have the truckers "Freedom Convoy" protest front and centre in our minds. Among the cornerstones of modern democracy are freedoms: the right of expression, assembly, protest. These are linked to other foundational ideas that are also at the heart of our free and open society, including justice, community, truth. ... The demands of the trucker's convoy for "freedom" might even be laughable if there was not so much at stake. What they want, they say, is more freedom. But what they really want, it seems, is freedom without responsibility. They want the right not to be vaccinated, which is where the protest movement began. That quickly devolved into calls for freedom from any covid-mandated restrictions, including wearing masks in public places. No one is denying them the right not to be vaccinated or wear a mask, but of course what they really want is the right to do so without consequences. We all have many freedoms, but in order for a free and ordered society to function, those freedoms come with certain responsibilities, and individual freedoms are balanced against the larger public good. It is certainly not the Christian way, so it pained me to see trucks decorated with Confederate flags and anti-vaccination messages also sporting slogans such as "Jesus Saves" and "Jesus is my Lord."

Of the situation our country finds itself in, one could almost be reminded of the poem "The Second Coming" by William Yeats, written in the aftermath of World War I:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

As I ran through my social media feed this past week, I had the real and raw temptation to unfollow or unfriend my friends, the people who I follow. The people I have known since childhood. People I admire and respect, but on this topic of conversation, I disagree with. And it got me thinking about what it means to follow someone, why do I follow Jesus, and why do you follow Jesus? What does the faith of Simon Peter say to us? Does it say that even though we are unworthy, or sinful from time to time, we are still invited to be a part of the group who seeks to make positive change? Do you hear God? Do you hear Jesus saying to you: "don't fear, there's nothing to fear, follow me, do as I do, and together we will change the world." I've never witnessed God in my life fill a net of fish, but I have had God put people into my life who I have followed. People who have transformed my life. For the most part, they were good people, and the lessons I have learned from them have allowed me to continue to navigate the waters of this life.

So how do we influence for the better? How do we working together become the influencers, the educators of goodness? What is your responsibility as a church, and what I mean by church is “people.” As a Christian, how will your relationship with Jesus Christ transform you to fish for people, to bring people to Christ, to know a God who seeks goodness, love, and justice. A God who doesn’t require a mandate to follow but rather a simple invitation. Oh, and yes there is that one mandate: TO LOVE.

This past week at our *Theology on Tap*, we listened to a video of former Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams discussing his thoughts on a COVID world, politics, change and cancel culture. In the video, he said, “politics is simply the art of humans living together.” I take heart in Dr. William’s words because the story of Simon Peter did not end there. Jesus did not send his new disciples out alone to preach the word. He sent them two by two. It took time for the early followers of Christ to grow up to serve their communities better. It takes time for us as followers of christ to finally get it right, to as we want to say, “Make a difference.” Prayer, breaking bread together, talking with each other instead of to each other, these things take time.

Henri Nouwen, in his book *Reflections on Christian Leadership: In the Name of Jesus*, writes “the Christian leader of the future is the one who truly knows the heart of God as it has become flesh, ‘a heart of flesh,’ in Jesus.”

As our nation continues to talk at each other, instead of with each other, what decisions have you been making lately and how are they a reflection of the way you sense the future? Do you trust that God is at work in you and that you are being moved to new inner and outer places as part of a larger movement to which you are only a very small part? As we follow Jesus, how will we work together and grow as we seek justice, peace, equality, and love.

I'll close with this short story:

A group of tourists were visiting a picturesque village who walked by an old man sitting beside a fence. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked, “Were any great men born in this village?” The old man replied, “Nope, only babies.” A frothy question brought a profound answer. There are no instant heroes—whether in this world or in the kingdom of God. Growth takes time!

In the end this week I didn't unfollow anyone. I hope to talk with my friends who I disagree with. I could have simply hit the button, but that would be childlike. There would be no growth in that. AMEN.