

Five Invitations from Jesus: Follow Me Sunday, 5/19/19

1 We're continuing today to learn about the invitations of Jesus. Jesus was a master of giving invitations that were personal and life-changing. The invitations he gave to the disciples and the crowds two thousand years ago are still invitations each of us can receive today. And even more, we can learn from Jesus how to become better at inviting others. Today we consider the invitation from Jesus to follow. Two thousand years ago, Jesus invited his disciples to follow. Jesus still says to us today, "Follow me." {I will follow}

2 How many of you have ever served in the armed forces? Then you understand better than the rest of us the difference between an invitation, a suggestion or request, and a command. Outside of the armed forces, there are very few circumstances in life when we expect to be commanded, at least once we're adults. Even our bosses really can't command us in the same way that a four-star general can. The worst that can happen to most of us if we disobey our boss is that we'll lose our jobs for insubordination, whereas soldiers can actually be tried under military justice.

Jesus was not a four-star general, and yet in the second reading this morning we saw another side of Jesus as he commanded his disciples to take him to the other side of the lake. This wasn't an invitation or a request. Those calling themselves disciples of Jesus were expected to not only do as their teacher did, but also do what he said to do. If you're feeling a little uncomfortable about that, you should be! It's much easier to think about the smiling Jesus who hands out invitations that we can always decline. It's much more difficult to come to grips with Jesus as our Lord and Master who commands not only our respect but also our complete allegiance in thought, word, and deed.

3 Maybe this is an image of Jesus that's a little more true to his character. Does anyone recognize this person? That's right, it's Rosa Parks, an icon of the civil rights movement in the American south who famously refused to give up her seat for a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama.¹ That was in 1955, which really isn't very long ago, people. Rosa Parks wasn't a four-star general either, but she did command respect as well as wield a certain amount of moral authority as someone who, ironically, stood up to bigoted

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosa_Parks

social policy by refusing to stand up. Like Jesus, Rosa Parks was a teacher who showed us a better way and challenged us to follow.

I told you last week that Jesus came as a revolutionary, to turn the prevailing social and religious orders on their heads. He had more in common with Rosa Parks than you might think. He spoke prophetic words to the people who held power. He advocated for the marginalized people of his time. He encouraged civil disobedience to rules that were unjust. He was even arrested for daring to stand up for what was right. Jesus, it turns out, was an agitator for change- not incremental change that comes through grassroots politics and legislative and judicial change, but radical change that comes by turning everything inside out and on its head.

Jesus was a rabble-rouser! That's the one who's giving you an invitation today. He might be asking today, but I'm warning you, if you accept his invitation, there will be expectations and, yes, even commands. The choice is up to you, so consider carefully how you'll respond. Jesus stands before us today and says, "Follow me." **{I will follow}**

4 It was only last week that we heard Jesus say, "[M]y yoke is easy, and my burden is light."² Jesus promised us rest for our souls. His words are true and his promises are good. At the same time, however, that easy yoke doesn't come without expectations. Jesus wanted to be clear that discipleship to him, while bringing us freedom from slavery to the law of Moses, was nevertheless a serious commitment. That's why here and in so many other Gospel readings, Jesus warns would-be followers that following him is not a casual endeavor, a part-time or weekend form of recreation that we can pick up or set down as we see fit.

5 The religion scholar pledged he would follow Jesus, but Jesus, looking into the man's heart, warned him that life on the road with Jesus would be hard. I wonder which road he chose. Another would-be disciple asked to be excused to bury his father first, something that not only seems appropriate to us but would have been expected of him at that time. Jesus doesn't really have a problem with honoring the dead, but looking into the man's heart, he saw that he wasn't yet ready to put Jesus first. Elsewhere in the Gospels, it was the

² Matthew 11:30, NRSV

rich young ruler who wasn't yet ready to follow Jesus because he loved his wealth more than Jesus, or the many would-be disciples who couldn't accept his radical teachings on eating his body and drinking his blood. Many turned away from following Jesus when he made it clear that he was on his way to Jerusalem to suffer and die.

It's not that Jesus has overly stringent recruitment requirements for his followers, it's that he has one requirement that simply can't be compromised. Jesus refuses to play second fiddle, to anyone or anything. The Word of God made flesh, the Alpha and the Omega, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, requires the whole of our heart. As Jesus himself said, "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other."³ So when Jesus invites us to follow him, he's not asking to friend us on Facebook. He's offering an invitation, but it's much more like a marriage proposal than an invitation to go out together for dinner. Therefore I urge you to consider well before you answer his invitation. Jesus stands before us today and says, "Follow me." **{I will follow}**

6 When I was growing up, when people talked about receiving a "call" from God, they really only meant clergy, and at that time, pretty much male clergy. Times have changed some, and we've come to accept that God calls a wide variety of people into ordained ministry. But we still have a ways to go in our understanding that God calls all of us into ministry, not just the ordained. Jesus didn't ordain anyone. He found ordinary people doing ordinary jobs and invited them, "Follow Me." He's still doing that, standing before us, ordinary people, and he says, "Follow me." **{I will follow}**

7 Jesus didn't establish seminaries and determine rigorous educational requirements in order to raise up an academy of highly-compensated professional ministers. In fact, he did just the opposite, rebuffing the most highly trained religious experts and choosing instead ordinary people, without training, education, or rank. Honestly, professional ministers like me are going to become fewer and fewer, as God raises up more and more lay people to reclaim the gifts and callings they have for ministry. I already see that happening around the Minnesota Annual Conference, where more and more Qualified Lay Leaders and Licensed Local Pastors are leading congregations. I see it happening more and more here in our

³ Matthew 6:24, New Living Translation (2nd Ed.)

congregation as more and more of you choose to say yes when invited to serve in a new ministry. I am so encouraged that so many of you have said yes to the invitation of Jesus to follow him, taking that commitment seriously, learning from Jesus and doing what Jesus did, bringing healing and joy to a hungry and hurting world in whatever small ways Jesus has called and equipped you for. Well done, good and faithful servants.

Please take a minute now to reflect on how God is calling you into ministry, and how you can say “yes” to Jesus.



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