

John 4:1-42 – Sermon – Follow Me (Not Worship Me!)
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Today is a very special day here at Plymouth, because today, immediately following the sermon, we will have a service to welcome new members into our congregation.

It is a very happy occasion indeed bringing in new members, and during the service we will reaffirm our commitment "... to be Christ's disciples, to follow in the way of Jesus, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to be a witness to the healing ministry and the loving message of Jesus Christ --- as best we are able..."

These words are straight from the United Church of Christ book of worship, and they are the actual promises we make when we choose to follow Jesus as a member of this church. But before we say these words, I want to talk about them, because they're not just words – they're serious vows.

Vows that involve big commitments –

And –

Vows that provoke a lot of questions.

We've all said these words before. We said them not long ago when we reaffirmed our baptism. On many occasions we have said these words, renewing our commitment to follow in the way of Jesus – together. But sometimes we can't help but wonder, who exactly is this Jesus guy, and where will he take us?

These are the big questions of our faith, and one of the primary reasons we come to church is to discover the Jesus we have promised to follow.

Isn't that interesting?

We follow a guy we're trying to find.

After his death, the original followers of Jesus quickly disbanded and went into hiding. They were afraid of being identified as his followers, but more than that, they were frightened and confused by what had just happened.

Because crucifixion was not part of the messianic plan.

The Messiah was supposed to rescue them from Roman oppression and restore Jerusalem to its former glory.

He kept telling them where things were leading, but it never seemed to sink in...even at the foot of cross...it still wasn't registering. The followers were too invested in their own narrative of the conquering Messiah, and all the way up until the moment of his last breath, they were still expecting a different outcome.

And then Jesus died –

Shattering their expectations.

And that might have been the end of the story – except something else happened.

Something that was much bigger than his death –

he showed up again. He came back from being dead.

It's a history that keeps repeating itself. Followers become invested in their own narrative; Jesus is crucified on the cross of human narrative, but then the Christ resurrects – always he resurrects.

JESUS SAVES!

What comes to your mind when you hear that phrase? For me it can be summed up in 21 words. "All of humanity is doomed, but if you believe in Jesus and behave yourself, you can be saved from eternal damnation."

That was the message I got. In the church I grew up in the message was way more refined than that, but it was the prevailing narrative of my time. In fact, for most Christian Americans, Jesus was the sacrificial lamb to an angry god who couldn't forgive humans for being human without innocent blood being spilled. And as a reward for his sacrifice, God made Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior who dispenses grace freely, but only to those who believe the story *and* meet certain criteria.

And who could argue with it? Until recently, all we had was the word of the church, and if you wanted to go up against that, well you're on your own kid. The church controlled the story. All of it. Remember Galileo?

Under threat of torture, imprisonment and even burning at the stake, Galileo was forced, on his knees, to renounce his belief that the sun, was the center of the universe and that Earth moved around the sun and not vice versa, as the church had been teaching.

It has taken a lot of guts to be a scientist in the shadow of the church. It has taken a lot of guts to be a theologian in the shadow of the church.

Today the world of modern biblical scholarship is dense – very dense. And trying to wade through it all is like having a very interesting headache.

My hat's totally off to biblical scholars.

They ask questions.

They poke holes in theories.

They dance with scripture, and they publish their thoughts.

But it required resistance, sacrifice, bloodshed, and an incredible amount of determination to move us to a place where the average person can ask questions and seek for themselves the way of Jesus.

It required death – lots of death – and resurrection – lots of resurrection.

And now, for the first time in history, we are finally starting to see that all the rules, all the judgments and ideas of God choosing some over others – all of the certainties, all of the wrath, all of the rewards and punishments of the white bearded angry god in the sky – all that garbage – doesn't even come close to the amazing mystery of a triune God reflected in the risen Christ.

For the first time we are starting to see that there's far more to our Christian faith than simply believing in Jesus. And it is a very exciting time because the new narrative is no narrative.

The new narrative is about finding ourselves surrounded by mystery and having the good grace to be humbled and awed by it.

The new narrative is about following the resurrected Christ who reveals that divinity is part of our humanity.

The new narrative is about accepting his invitation to “come and see.”

Jesus told the woman at the well: “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

Did you hear that story in Sunday school? I don’t remember hearing it. If we did, the emphasis wasn’t on this special water that Jesus offers. If anything, it would have been on how quick everyone was to believe in him and how we too should have that kind of faith.

The story’s about faith all right, but not the kind of faith that’s built on fear or coercion. It’s the kind of faith that makes me long for some of that clear cool living water, knowing that it is poured out to everyone, in every time and place, quenching our thirst for meaning, purpose and connection.

Our human tendency is to think that living water is limited; that the well is only so deep and reserved for the chosen few. But now the façade is crumbling. Now we are at a crossroads of death and resurrection, and for the first time since Constantine signed up to be a Christian, the church does not run the show anymore.

So when we come together in this tiny corner of the church to renew our commitment and receive new members into our church family, my faith is energized, because I know that we are truly stepping out in faith, that we are responding to the call of something big – something really big – like a shared internal compass pointing us in the direction we need to go.

Pointing to the one we need to follow.

Pointing to the sacred.

Before Jesus, humans could not imagine what God was like. Jesus was the human face of God. And what’s more, he showed us that the divine is not out there somewhere – it is within us – all of us. As Richard Rohr says, “That’s why he didn’t say, “Worship me.” He said, “Follow me.””

We are all expressions of the divine, wandering around lost. St Augustine said it well when he said: “My soul is restless, and it will never be at rest until it finds rest in Thee.”

At least 23 times in all four of the gospels, Jesus said, “follow me.” He didn’t say “idolize me,” or “worship me,” or “build extravagant cathedrals to honor me,” or “craft fine liturgies,” or “write long and ponderous books about me.” His final instructions were: “feed my lambs; tend my sheep and follow me...”

Now I know that there are some troubling passages in the bible such as John 3:16 that seem to imply that belief in Jesus is the only way to make it to heaven. And I don’t want to get into a scholarly debate about context and layered meanings.

Because what I also know is that in Matthew 25 Jesus makes a very long and comprehensive statement about who makes it into God’s kingdom, and the deciding factor for who’s in and who’s out doesn’t

hinge on our belief in him; it hinges on how well we love. He says: “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

When Jesus says “follow me,” he leads us deep into our own troubled humanity and calls us to action. He shows us how intertwined we are with each other, and how we can either continue to poison the water or we can clean it up.

His instructions apply to every one of us who wants to be a disciple, and this brings us right back to our vows to be Christ’s disciples, to follow in the way of Jesus, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to be a witness to the healing ministry and the loving message of Jesus Christ --- as best we are able...”

We are Christians who have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus. Over and over again he says: “follow me.” And what I’ve found, is that by following him I get my priorities and allegiances right and I’m able to connect with the God he worshipped. I might not know the recipe for living water, but I know who will lead me to all the living water I can handle. The one I choose to follow – Jesus Christ. Amen