

January 14, 2024
Faithful Plodding
John 1:35-42

This winter we're looking at some of the first "followers of Jesus." This is a phrase we introduced last week. It's how the first people who lived for Jesus described themselves. It's an action phrase, a dynamic term. These folks didn't just "believe in Jesus." They followed Him. We often focus on famous people, like Simon (also known as Peter). What about some of the others? After all, most of us aren't famous, either. This morning we'll consider one of those "other people" – a pretty ordinary guy named Andrew – coincidentally Simon's brother.

Andrew and Simon are fishermen in Bethsaida, a small village on the Sea of Galilee, northern Israel. Interestingly, "Simon" is a Hebrew name. "Andrew" is a Greek name. Here, far from the religious hub of Jerusalem, people are as much Greek as Jewish in language and culture. And here, as elsewhere in Israel, people are waiting for the Messiah, the Christ, the long-awaited Saviour. John the Baptist has been wandering this wilderness, preaching: *"Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of God is near."* Andrew is one of the people who is drawn to John the Baptist and is following him about (1:40).

When John the Baptist meets Jesus, he says, *"Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ... I saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove from heaven and resting upon him ... God told me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit descend and rest is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I saw this happen to Jesus, so I testify that he is the Chosen One of God."* (John 1:29-34). There's a definite buzz in the air.

The next day, as Andrew and an unnamed friend are with John the Baptist, Jesus walks by again. Once more, John says, *"Look! The Lamb of God!"* (1:35-36), drawing on Old Testament imagery for the Messiah. When Andrew and his friend hear this, they follow Jesus. Jesus asks, *"What do you want?"* They reply (rather awkwardly), *"Rabbi, where are you staying?"* Clearly, they want to know more about Him. *"Come and see,"* Jesus says.

The gospel-writer, John, probably that unnamed friend, notes, *"It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when they went with him to the place he was staying, and they remained with him the rest of the day ... **Andrew** went to find his brother, Simon, and told him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which means 'Christ'). Then **Andrew** brought Simon to meet Jesus. Looking intently at Simon, Jesus said, 'Your name is Simon, son of John, but you will be called Cephas' (which means 'Peter')"* (1:39-42). FYI, "Cephas" (Aramaic) = "Peter" (Greek) = "Rock" (English) is a nickname Jesus gives Simon, Andrew's brother (1:42). He is literally Simon "the Rock" Ben-Jonah. This will be significant in Simon/Peter's story.

But we're telling Andrew's story. **Andrew** says to Simon, *"We have found the Messiah."* Then **Andrew** brings Simon to Jesus. Simon/Peter will go on to great things in the gospels and the Book of Acts. He writes two of our New Testament letters. He's key in the growth of

the Christian church. He's recognized as the first Bishop/pastor of Rome. But it's **Andrew** who first tells Simon about Jesus and brings Simon to Jesus. Without **Andrew**, who knows?

For several months, Andrew and Simon/Peter, spend time with Jesus. Probably Andrew and Simon are there when Jesus turns water into wine in nearby Cana (John 2:2). Later, they go with Jesus on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a Passover celebration (John 2:13-22). John the Baptist is still preaching and baptizing. Between these trips with Jesus, Andrew, Simon, and the rest seem to drift home, returning to their life as fishermen.

About a year later, after John the Baptist is arrested, things change (Matthew 4:12). *"As Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers – Simon, also called Peter, and **Andrew** – throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. Jesus called out to them, 'Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!' And they (Andrew and Simon) left their nets at once and followed him"*(Matthew 4:18-20).

Jesus is becoming more intentional about His ministry. He finds Andrew and company back at their nets. This time, Jesus is calling them to leave fishing for fish completely. Andrew and the others are asked to leave their old lives totally behind. No more Bethsaida. Boats. Nets. Fish. Security. Predictability. They have no idea where they're going. They have no idea what it means to "fish for people." But they follow Jesus into who knows what. Crazy!

Now they're back, on the far side of the Sea of Galilee (John 6:1-13). Thousands are following Jesus. Jesus asks Philip, *"Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?"* Philip replies, *"Even if we worked for months, we wouldn't have enough money to feed them!"* Notice what happens next. *"Then **Andrew**, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up. 'There's a young boy here with five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that with this huge crowd?'"* Andrew simply speaks up. He introduces a boy to Jesus. Jesus easily takes the boy's lunch and feeds everyone. Andrew, by simply speaking up, changes everything.

Later still, *"Some Greeks who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration paid a visit to Philip. They said, 'Sir, we want to meet Jesus.' Philip told **Andrew** about it, and they went together to see Jesus"*(John 12:20-22). Andrew? He introduces these people – these Greeks/non-Jews – to Jesus. Andrew, by simply speaking up, changes everything.

That's really all we know about Andrew from the Bible. He doesn't get a special nickname, preach famous sermons, do miracles, have visions, write letters, or escape prisons like Peter, John, or Paul. So what do we do with Andrew? Think about him for a bit ...

1. **Andrew spends time with Jesus.** When we read the gospels – as Jesus teaches, heals people, forgives people, challenges religious leaders, and so forth – Andrew is there. He is one of "The Twelve." He is one of those who sees Jesus' arrested and crucified. He sees Jesus after His resurrection. He experiences the Holy Spirit come in power at Pentecost. He isn't in the limelight. But he's there. Listening. Learning.

As we go through life, it's good to spend time with God, with Jesus, in His Spirit. Last week, I suggested we consciously try to "follow Jesus" every day. One thing we can do is read the Bible daily. For the next several weeks, through Easter, in our guides, we're reading through the Gospel of John. It's an opportunity, each day, to spend time with Jesus (and Andrew!). We can also follow Jesus as we pray. Prayer, in its essence, is simply sharing life with Jesus. Talking with – speaking to AND listening to – God in the ups/downs of life. Like Andrew, we do this in the community of God's people. "Following Jesus" is something we do together. We can learn from wise mentors. We can be accountable to one another. We can encourage one another.

2. When someone is searching for answers, Andrew brings them to Jesus.

Simon, like others of his generation, are looking for the Messiah. Andrew doesn't do a lot, but he does introduce Simon to Jesus. Jesus takes it from there. Some Greeks want to meet Jesus. Andrew makes that happen. Jesus takes it from there.

We don't need to know all the answers. When people are looking for meaning, hope, purpose, guidance, and answers, we can introduce them to Jesus. Jesus can take it from there. Sure, we may be part of the process. We can help people find more specific answers to their questions. If we don't know the answer, we can work with our friend to find what they're looking for. We can learn and grow through that process. We can care for people. We can surprise ourselves. In the end, we don't "convert" anyone or "convince" anyone. The Holy Spirit/Jesus/God does that.

3. When there's a need, Andrew brings what he can to Jesus. People on the hillside are hungry. They need food. Philip throws his hands up in despair. Andrew brings a boy and his paltry lunch to Jesus. Jesus can make that small gift work.

There are LOTS of needs in our world, in our community, even just in our church. People are hungry; they need food. They're lonely; they need friends. People experience racism, sexism, ageism, ability-ism, and more. They need advocates. People are looking for meaning, purpose, and hope; they need Jesus. It all seems overwhelming. But with what little we can offer, who knows what Jesus can do?

4. Andrew keeps plodding. Judas betrays Jesus. Thomas has doubts. Even Peter – literally the "rock" star – denies Jesus three times. As far as we can tell, Andrew just keeps the faith, day in and day out. Early church historians record him preaching in Scythia, modern day Ukraine. He travels up the Dnieper River, past what is now Kyiv, into Russia, as far as Novgorod, sharing his faith as he goes (he is the patron saint of both Ukraine and Russia). Andrew goes to Byzantium (Constantinople/Istanbul). He establishes a church and is the first Bishop/pastor of Byzantium. He travels through Thrace (western Turkey) into Greece. He keeps patiently plodding – over 8000 kms – through pretty wild places (from Lethbridge to Halifax and back). Eventually, Andrew is killed for his faith in Patras, Greece, in AD 60. Tradition says he was crucified on an X-shaped cross ("St. Andrew's Cross"). He felt unworthy to be executed on the same type of cross as Jesus.

At the end of the day, I wonder if Andrew felt like he'd accomplished much. He never knew if any of the people he talked to about Jesus kept the faith. Following Jesus in those days, in those places was tough, tough, tough. Would they all just walk away? After all, a lot of the people who started following Jesus, in-person, in Israel, quickly drifted away. Yet there are an estimated 220 million Orthodox Christians today – and who knows how many more millions through the ages – many of whom can trace their legacy of faith back, in part, to Andrew, this rather ordinary guy who kept on plodding.

Andrew is one of my heroes because he seems to be a “plodder.” He isn't the sharpest tool in the box. He's not a gifted teacher, preacher, scholar, or writer (we know of nothing he taught, preached, or wrote). But Andrew keeps on following Jesus, wherever that leads him.

Micah Everett, music professor at the University of Mississippi writes, *"I am always moved by stories of pastors with long tenures in small congregations. In a time when 'celebrity pastor' is a term that makes sense and so many build careers by moving to increasingly larger churches every 2-3 years, there is something peculiarly beautiful about a pastor serving the same congregation for 20, 30, or even 50 years. We're talking about a person who has faithfully loved, prayed for, preached to, counseled, comforted, admonished, baptized, married, and buried generations of the same families. Such stories rarely generate headlines except perhaps locally on the occasion of the minister's retirement or death ..."*

He goes on talk of music professors in small colleges who train a large percentage of music teachers and performers, students who will impact hundreds and thousands of students and concertgoers in schools and communities. *"To participate in the success of such students is immensely fulfilling, but it is not flashy. It can't be distilled into brief soundbites nor does it generate a lot of exciting YouTube videos ... That work of building and sustaining excellence, one student at a time, is the work of a lifetime."*

"Both the minister and the professor in my examples are engaging in what I like to call 'faithful plodding.' Day by day, one sermon after another, one congregant after another, one student after another, diligently doing the work of teaching, admonishing, correcting, encouraging – of building up individuals in their lives and work ... There's not a lot of 'flash-bang' in this approach, but it works."

Andrew models “faithful plodding.” He lives with Jesus. He learns from Jesus. He tries to follow Jesus. There's not a lot of “flash-bang.” An ordinary guy. An amazing legacy.

What about me? Can I keep on, faithfully, plodding? Can I ask Jesus, “Today, how can I follow you?” I may never know what the effect of my faithful plodding might be. There may not be a lot of “flash-bang.” That's OK. Day by day, Lord, help me just to follow Jesus ...