



## Christ's Community Church

### **Mark 1:14-20; "Following the Leader"; January 25, 2009; Pastor Jenny Moran**

Let us pray. Lord God, open our eyes today that we may understand your will so that we may better serve you. Amen.

As many of you know, I grew up not far from here in Chaska. If you are familiar with the town, you might know where the original Chaska Elementary School is located, right on highway 41. Well behind the school there was an area referred to as the Ravine. This was, indeed, a ravine but it was a big one, filled with walking trails, exercise stations, streams, trees, bridges, and lots of wooded area to explore. For elementary school children it was an adventurous, exciting place, full of possibilities that carried our imaginations to new places. This was encouraged by the insight of the teachers who often took us there when the weather was nice to complete nature projects and just to explore.

Well, those are my elementary school memories of the Ravine, but fast forward a few years and I have very different memories of it. I ran cross country in high school and the team would often practice in the Ravine. The gravel trails were perfect practice for the kind of races we ran and the area was big enough to provide a nice average 5-7 mile run. At this point in my life, however, I was less taken with the exploration possibilities offered by the Ravine and more aware of what I considered the unpleasant aspects of the place. On our runs through the Ravine we would often find streams filled with scummy water, mosquitoes, whole families of beaver, and many small creatures which made me more than a little edgy.

Clearly, I'm not much of an outdoors-person, so I endured the Ravine practice days with varying degrees of good humor. The good humor, however, took a hike on the



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day that the coach announced we would begin *real* cross country training by following one leader off the Ravine trails and through the woods. The leader's task was to make it as difficult as possible and present us with as many obstacles as he or she could while at the same time expecting us to keep up. We also had to follow this leader no matter where they led us and to top it all off, the leader was always one of the senior boys because they knew the woods the best.

Frankly, I'm not sure what the coaches were thinking giving 12<sup>th</sup> grade guys that kind of power over 9<sup>th</sup> grade girls, because the guys sure took advantage of it. The low point came one day when the leader, after leading us through a stream where we came face to face with a deceased member of that beaver family I mentioned, led us to what turned out to be a 7 foot cliff that had eroded from the hillside. Cliff might be too strong a word, but you get what I mean. ☹ A straight drop 7 feet down. I was behind the guys on the team and sure enough, over they went following their leader like a bunch of overgrown lemmings, just disappearing over the side.

Well, I had my limits and so did one of my good friends. She and I were the first girls there and we kind of skidded to a halt, gasping for breath, and just stared at the drop. How in the world were we, at less than 5 and a half feet tall, supposed to make that drop? We couldn't just jump because there were trees and undergrowth and no real bottom to land on. The lemmings who had already gone over the edge were all apparently alive, but they were also all guys who were close to a foot taller than we were.

As we stood there, wanting to follow our leader despite our common sense, trying to figure out how we could continue on following someone who clearly was crazy, a wonderful thing happened. Out of the trees, near the bottom of the cliff, our leader



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appeared. He had realized as he ran that we probably couldn't make that drop on our own. Yet he had already led the team that way and couldn't lead us a different way, so he did the only thing left. He came back, reached up his hand, and carefully helped us skid our way down that cliff.

Now, I can't say that this one act of truly great leadership made me forgive him immediately for taking us through the stream and over a cliff, but it certainly made it easier to do eventually! And when I think about the way our leader modeled leadership for us on that cross country run, I realize that there are some parallels to the kind of leadership Jesus offers us. As Christians we are to follow our leader. We are to follow him through difficult paths as well as neatly groomed trails, knowing that we can trust him, that he will lead us in the way best for us. And, when the path becomes too difficult for us to navigate on our own, we also trust that Jesus will be there to help us through it, to lift us up or help us down to continue following him on the journey.

Our Scripture lesson today tells us of the first time in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus called people to follow him. We read from the Gospel of John last week about the calling of Philip and Nathaniel and this week see Jesus call Simon and Andrew, James and John to follow him as his disciples, to become fishers of men. This is a short, somewhat straightforward part of Scripture, but I'd like you to take a trip in your imagination with me, and it will require a little more imagination than usual today because I'd like you to let my cross country experience run somewhat parallel with the journey of the disciples. I'd like to imagine what it must have meant for Simon and Andrew, James and John, as well as all the other disciples to drop everything they were doing to follow Jesus.



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We read in these verses today that Jesus came to the lakeshore where these men were going about their daily tasks of fishing, repairing nets, and supporting their community. And Jesus called these men to repent and to follow him. All we hear of their response, though, is that they left their father, their livelihood, their possessions just as they were and walked off and followed Jesus. But we have lots of other Scripture that lets us know what their upcoming journey was like. Following Jesus started out pretty great for them, seeing Jesus drive out evil spirits, seeing him healing many people of all kinds of ailments from leprosy to paralysis. They listened to all his wise teaching, learning and growing in him so that they became more complete and whole people. Simon, James, and John even witnessed Jesus raising Jairus' daughter from the dead. These were, on a much more significant scale, some of the same kinds of feelings I had as a child, exploring the Ravine with my teachers, being awed by the wonderful things I experienced there.

But things started to come apart a little for the disciples, just as my enthusiasm for the Ravine began to wane. Jesus' teachings were questioned in his own hometown. John the Baptist, the one who proclaimed Jesus' coming, was beheaded...definitely not a good sign. The Pharisees began testing Jesus and challenging him on his unorthodox practices that didn't match with Jewish teaching but did match with the commands of God. Simon and Andrew, James and John, and all the other disciples were probably beginning to realize that being a follower of Jesus may not always be a nice, neat path with no obstacles and lots of opportunity for rest and enjoyment.

Nevertheless, the journey was still at this point exhilarating, a time of exploration and outreach. Jesus sent the twelve disciples out on their own to spread the news that



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people should repent of their sins and believe, and with his power they healed many people. When the disciples return from their solo journeys, they witnessed the great miracle of 5,000 people being fed by Jesus with only five loaves and two fish. Simon Peter even recognized that Jesus was Christ, the Messiah, the one in whom we find our salvation. And they witnessed Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain top. Now that must have been an indescribably beautiful part of their journey as followers of Christ!

They continued on in their journey following Jesus and the way became increasingly rougher. They still experienced the wonder of Jesus' miracles and they still grew in their faith and understanding of him. They still ministered to others and spread the news of repentance and forgiveness to all people. They triumphantly rode into Jerusalem, still following Jesus, but they were definitely off the easy, well-groomed trail by this time. They had to fight their way through trees, over streams, and find ways to overcome other obstacles as they followed their leader.

And then they reached that point like my friend and I did in the Ravine during cross-country practice. They simply could not follow their leader where he had gone. They found themselves betraying him with a kiss like Judas did; betraying him with their own denial of knowing him, like Simon Peter did; betraying him simply by no longer following him, by standing by and watching him be sent to the cross to meet his death alone.

I imagine the disciples didn't *want* to betray Jesus, but they couldn't follow him across that chasm, down that cliff to the cross and they were left like my friend and I were during that long ago cross country practice: confused, unable to turn back but not really able to go forward, either, without their leader.



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But here is the Good News of Jesus Christ—not just that we should repent although that is a crucial part of it—but that in the midst of the disciples' darkness and confusion, in the midst of *our* darkness and confusion, Jesus steps out of the gloom and reaches his hand to us and helps us over that cliff. He has suffered the pain of that crashing descent for us first and has conquered death so that he could rise again and lead us through the rest of our journey. Through his death and resurrection he has bridged the gap that sin made between us and God.

And as his followers, we share not only in his death but also in his life, in his resurrection and eternity with God. We can't attain eternal life on our own, but if we follow Jesus, repenting of our sins and believing in him, he will help us over that chasm of sin and death to live eternally with God. He rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples to guide them over their betrayal of him, to lead them forward past that precipice, so that they could continue his ministry on earth, still confident in their leader and spreading his good news to all people.

So what does the disciples' journey tell us about our journey following Jesus our leader? Well, it tells us that although we will not always have an easy path to follow, we will always have Jesus there with us, helping us through the difficult parts. The disciples' journey also tells us that we can trust Jesus completely. Even when he seems to be leading us somewhere dangerous—as it must have seemed to the disciples in those days surrounding Jesus' death,—he will not lead us to a place that he cannot help us through.

The disciples' journey also teaches us that Jesus might call us to do something that is outside of our comfort zones, to do something that might even go against our own



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families' traditions and expectations. I doubt Zebedee was too impressed by his sons James and John leaving him by the lakeshore with the boats no matter how good their reason. And heaven knows my mother certainly would have been appalled if she had known I was being led through streams and over cliffs during my cross country practices, but those practices made me a better runner. Likewise, facing challenges as followers of Christ can make us stronger Christians.

And finally, the disciples' journey teaches us that when Jesus calls us he calls us to action. He expects us to spread his good news just as the disciples did both before and after his death. We don't have to save the world on our own, but we do have to tell the world that *Jesus* can save them. We need to bear witness to his power in everything we do, to his goodness and love as our one and only leader, never losing sight of his priority in our lives.

To distill all this down into one sentence, let me say this: following Jesus means that we spread the good news of his saving love, calling others to repentance and belief in him, always knowing that we have a leader who will not abandon us to the hardships of the journey. Wherever Jesus leads us, both individually and as a church, we must share the Good News of his love with others and if we aren't doing that, then we aren't following Jesus.

We don't know what that journey will look like any more than the disciples did when they started out. Sometimes we will be walking on nicely groomed trails with benches for rest along the way. Other times we will follow our leader through challenging trails, when our direction may not be clear and we just have to trust that our



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leader knows where he's going. And there will be times when we reach a cliff, a precipice, and only Jesus will be able to stretch out his hand and help us over it.

May we as a congregation move forward in our journey this year, certain that we are following Jesus, doing his will, and spreading his good news to all people everywhere. Let us pray.