

Carol M. Strickland
 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
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 Texts: John 1:35-51, Psalm 66:1-5

Zoe: A Disciple's Life

Introduction to Scripture

In the rhythm of the Narrative Lectionary we have been following, we spend each fall semester in the Old Testament and each spring semester in one of the Gospels. The gospel for this semester is John. So, here's a very brief introduction to the Gospel of John.

In our Bibles, John is the fourth in line after Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Those three—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are known as the Synoptic Gospels because they share a similar point of view: Syn = same and Optic = vision. They share many of the same stories and teachings of Jesus and follow the same chronology. While all four gospels paint a distinct portrait of Jesus, John's is decidedly different from the Synoptics'. For example, the synoptic Jesus is fond of telling pithy parables that begin, "The Kingdom of God is like..." whereas the Johannine Jesus is pretty verbose and likes to speak in long discourses and use rich metaphors, irony, and symbolism. John's gospel begins not with the baby Jesus in the manger but with high-flying prose, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." You could say that John is a more contemplative gospel. Someone has called it theological reflection in the form of a story.¹ Nevertheless, as distinctive as John, the Fourth Gospel, is, all four gospels have much in common and are clearly about the same goal: interpreting the story of Jesus for the life of the Christian community.

Our text this morning comes from the first chapter. It is John's version of Jesus calling his first disciples. In this passage, you'll hear a number of titles and roles for Jesus: Lamb of God, Rabbi or Teacher, Messiah or Anointed, Him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth, Son of God, King of Israel, and Son of Man. It's clear that Jesus is multi-faceted, whose identity and purpose cannot be summed up in just one way. The John mentioned in the first sentence of our text is John the Baptist, the one the Fourth Gospel said came as a witness to testify to the light, the one who was the voice crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord."

Listen now for God's word: *John 1:35-51*.

Sermon

In preparation for today's sermon, I have read and reread the gospel text about the calling of the first disciples, poured over numerous commentaries, compiled pages of exegetical notes, and prayed for guidance. In spite of all this, I keep coming back to my dog Zoe. The phrases that jump out of the gospel story, "follow me," "come and see," and "remained with him" keep showing up with brown eyes, a moist black nose, and a bushy tale. Every time I contemplate what faithful discipleship looks like, I see our shaggy mutt Zoe.

She has been my best dog ever, and there have been many in my lifetime. Nip, Henry,

Spot, Rufus, Lulu, Pixie, Blitz, Goethe, Baru, BT, and Frisco preceded her. But Zoe has surpassed them all especially in character, but also in intelligence and longevity. Alas, now 12 ½ years old, she has been diagnosed with cancer. The thought of life without her unfailing, unconditional welcome at the door with wagging tail and loving eyes when I come home each day is nearly unbearable. So, I hope you will grant me some leeway as I praise this hound of heaven and proclaim that if not *everything*, at least a lot, of what I learned about discipleship, I learned from my dog Zoe.

She began her life with us with unpromising prospects. But maybe that could be said of most disciples, though thankfully in the Gospel of John, the disciples are not as obtuse as in, say, the Gospel of Mark. Anyway, we put out the word that we were looking for a new dog. The response came. A family someone knew of in the country had a litter of pups. So, on a Saturday morning, Jack and I and our two children piled in our minivan and arrived at the appointed place. Xan chose the one. She was cute, all right. What puppy isn't? But she was so quiet and still, more like a limp dishrag than a lively puppy, that I honestly thought she must be mentally retarded. It turns out she was beset by dozens of fleas--and worms to boot--so after a trip to the vet, in a couple of weeks she was a normal, frisky puppy.

Xan named her Zoe. Zoe, which is the Greek word for *life*, appears 34 times in the gospel of John—almost three times more than the other three gospels combined. Jesus in John talks about life a lot, especially eternal life, everlasting life, abundant life. It's life that is available to those who follow him. "Whoever follows me," he said, "will never walk in darkness but will have the light of *zoe*, the light of life."ⁱⁱ

So, what has this dog Zoe, taught me about discipleship?

First, discipleship means following. If any creature took following seriously, it is this dog. If I am in the kitchen but walk back to the bedroom to get my glasses, I hear the click, click, click of her toenails right behind me. If I go upstairs to watch tv, she comes, too. Jack took her with him to our mountain house a few days this fall. When he returned, he commented that she followed him every step he took—in the house, out on the deck, to the workshop, into the woods, across the road--never letting him out of her sight.

Christian discipleship means, of course, following Jesus. Two of John the Baptist's disciples became Jesus' first followers. One of them was Andrew. Andrew brought his brother Peter. The next day Jesus invited Philip, who knew Andrew and Peter, to follow him. Philip recruited Nathaniel, who was skeptical at first ("Can anything good come out of Podunk Nazareth?") but was quickly won over. These disciples, joined by others whom Jesus choseⁱⁱⁱ, followed Jesus, according to the way John tells it, for three years, on foot, in boats, in and out of villages, and back and forth three times from Galilee to Jerusalem. Their following was literal.

But it was also on a deeper level. To follow Jesus means to trust him, to know him, and believe in him. It is to conform your life to the pattern of his. There develops a congruence between the disciple's character and Jesus' character. Nowhere do we find a life devoted to one's own success, pleasure, comfort, freedom from suffering, or power at the expense of others compatible with Christian discipleship. Nowhere are the attitudes of arrogance, hedonism, envy, acquisitiveness, self-aggrandizement, or hostility modeled by Jesus. To follow Jesus means to follow his example, and it's hard to do that if you don't stay close, going where he goes, doing what he does. Zoe is an expert follower of her Master...and Mistress.

"Follow me," Jesus said.

Secondly, Jesus also said, "Come and see." Zoe knows and obeys the command "Come"

both by voice and by hand signal. She knows and obeys a bunch of other commands, too. As for “See,” she is the only dog I’ve had who comprehends a pointing finger. She actually looks beyond the end of your finger to the object you are pointing at. She truly sees, i.e. understands.

“Come and see” is a refrain that echoes throughout John’s gospel. We hear it twice in today’s text and in two other stories, as well. It’s an invitation to get up and look at what Jesus is doing. It’s an invitation to show up and pay attention to God in our midst. Things might not be as they first appear. With the eyes of faith, we see things differently.

Do you see the recent tornado wreckage as evidence that God doesn’t care, or can you spot Jesus turning up among the rubble with trash bags and a chain saw?

Do you see a dishrag and pile of dirty dishes by your sink as an unwelcome chore, or do you see a basin and a towel, and hear a voice calling you to practice a little humility?

Do you see the new calendar page as just more same ol’ same ol’, or as a God-given gift, a fresh start, a chance to learn and grow?

Zoe comes bounding when I holler “Come” and she responds when I point to her bowl across the kitchen for her to see the tidbit I have put there for her.

“Come and see,” Jesus said.

Notice, we’ve been attending to the verbs in our text: “follow,” “come,” and “see.” The last one I wish to point out is “remain.” It’s also translated as “abide.” John tells us that the two disciples who came and saw where Jesus was staying “remained with him,” or in the King James “abode with him.”

Zoe wants more than anything to abide with us, to remain quite near us. I’ve never had a dog want to be so close by. It took me a long time to understand this. In the past, my dogs were all relegated to the kitchen. They were taught not to go beyond the tile floor into the rest of the house. But this dog snuck in every chance she got. I thought she was just being willfully disobedient. Since there was no door from the kitchen into the living room, I had Jack install a baby gate. Zoe cried and cried behind it and chewed up the door frame around it. I finally realized that she wanted desperately to be near us in every room, not just the kitchen. I gave up the fight. She has free reign of the house. She is a happy dog.

Our exterior back doorknob has dents and bite marks all over it. That’s because Zoe learned to open the door with her teeth to let herself back into the house if, when she returns from doing her business, no one happens to be on the lookout for her. That’s how much she wants to abide with us!

In the 15th chapter of John, Jesus goes crazy with the verb “abide.” I know, because this was the passage I had to translate for my Greek 1 exam. Here’s part of it:

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.^{iv}

To be Jesus’ disciple means to be in a sustaining, fruitful relationship with him, to abide in him, and him in you. It’s means sticking close to him, and by extension to his body, the church. It’s a nourishing relationship of mutual love.

That’s my third point, and that’s where a three-point sermon should end, but Zoe has taught me one more thing about discipleship that doesn’t show up in our text this morning but which is too crucial to leave out. She is an excellent example of servanthood. Her service is comprised of two jobs which she takes very seriously.

One is Chief Warner. It is her job to warn us of any approaching danger, like a UPS delivery person, a neighbor jogging by, or a trick-or-treating tyke. I don't think this job actually extends to Chief Protector—she's all deep-throated, loud bark and no bite. But she is very conscientious about alerting us to impending doom.

Her second job is as an All-In-One Canine Dispose-All / Dishwasher. She licks every morsal off of every pot, pan, and plate. She is so thorough that she places her paw on the dish to anchor it down while her powerful tongue hoovers off every speck of food. I wonder why we even bother to load the dishwasher. If we don't put our used cookware and dinnerware on the floor for her, she is insulted and hurt that we have not allowed her to do her job.

Zoe serves us well. She uses she skills she's got—barking and licking—to help out in the kingdom. Her service begs the questions: What God-given talents and abilities do you and I have? Can we serve with as much dedication and enthusiasm as this dog?

Zoe. Her name means life. A life of Christian discipleship—of following Jesus, of coming and seeing what he is up to, of abiding in him, and of faithful service—this is the life to which we are called. This is a life worth living. This is eternal life. No bones about it! Amen.

ⁱ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p. 180.

ⁱⁱ John 8:12

ⁱⁱⁱ John 6:70

^{iv} John 15:4-5