

## THE PIED PIPER OF GALILEE?

The Rev. J. Donald Waring  
Grace Church in New York  
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 21, 2018

*Immediately (Jesus) called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. (Mark 1:20)*

When I was a child a humorous story always aroused a certain fear in my gut. Then I became a parent and I heard it with a new-found foreboding. Today it still has the power to amuse and terrify at the same time. Robert Browning's, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, tells of events in Hamelin, near Hanover, in July of 1376. In wonderful verse Browning describes how the town was overrun with:

*Rats!  
They fought the dogs and killed the cats,  
And bit the babies in the cradles,  
And ate the cheeses out of the vats,  
And licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles,  
Split open the kegs of salted sprats,  
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,  
And even spoiled the women's chats  
By drowning their speaking  
With shrieking and squeaking  
In fifty different sharps and flats.*

Nobody in Hamelin knew what to do. The Mayor and the town Corporation were helpless. Finally, into one of their meetings strode a fellow calling himself the Pied Piper. For a mere thousand guilders he promised he could rid the town of every rat. The astonished Mayor and Corporation exclaimed that such a feat would be worth fifty-thousand guilders, and invited the stranger to give it a try. As you probably know, the Piper went into the street, played his pipe, and within minutes an army of rats came dancing out of every building. They followed the Piper down to the river Weser, where they plunged in and were drowned. Only one rat escaped to warn his fellow rodents in other rat villages to beware of the mysterious Piper, who could make them follow against their will.

If the story ended there it would be a happy tale. But it doesn't end there, and it isn't a happy tale. With every rat gone the people of Hamelin began rejoicing. Then the Pied Piper came to claim his thousand guilders. Suddenly, the Mayor and Corporation thought the price was a bit too steep: "*Beside, our losses have made us thrifty. A thousand guilders! Come, take fifty!*" The Piper warned them not to trifle with him: they'd be sorry. The Mayor didn't take kindly to being threatened; he dared the Piper to do his worst. So the Piper did. He stepped into the street once more, played his pipe, and while all the adults stood watching, powerless to intervene,

*Out came the children running,  
All the little boys and girls,  
With rosy cheeks and flaxen curls,  
And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls,  
Tripping and skipping, ran merrily after  
The wonderful music with shouting and laughter.*

And then,

*When, lo, as they reached the mountain side,  
A wondrous portal opened wide,  
as if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;  
And the Piper advanced and the children followed,  
And when all were in to the very last,  
The door in the mountain-side shut fast.*

The people of Hamelin never again heard from the Piper or the children. So beware of anyone who promises to take away your rats, and pipes for you to follow without question.

Today's lesson from the Gospel of Mark could easily be misread as *The Pied Piper of Galilee*. A man named Zebedee ran a somewhat successful fishing business on the shores of the Sea of Galilee with his two sons, James and John. One day Jesus came to where Zebedee and James and John were in their boat mending their nets. Jesus called to James and John; immediately they left their father Zebedee in the boat, and they followed him. So it was that these two brothers all at once dropped everything and without question ran merrily after Jesus. Does it bother you how easily they followed? It bothers me because the way we usually interpret the calling of the disciples leads to a number of assumptions about what it means for us to be followers of Jesus today. I think these may be assumptions that are terribly off the mark.

The first thing we normally assume is that the disciples of Jesus left their various trades never to return to them as long as they were in the company of Jesus. Whether they were fishermen, tax collectors, farmers, carpenters, lawyers, or toolmakers, Jesus presented them with a higher calling. No longer would they have time for these less important occupations. Jesus would lead them to the places and people where real ministry needed to happen. We imagine that for the next three years, seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day, the twelve disciples would be walking in the company of Jesus: following him, soaking in his teachings, witnessing his miracles, and never leaving his presence.

The next assumption logically follows: the disciples of Jesus, upon hearing his call, left their families just as quickly and decisively as they left their trades. James and John left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired hands – not a word of good-bye, not a feeling of remorse. I've always felt badly for poor Zebedee, standing there powerless to intervene as his children went running off with the mysterious piper. We can imagine that James and John had probably tagged at their father's heels since they were toddlers. And once they were old enough to work, Zebedee was probably proud to pass on to them what he knew of life and living. But loyalty to Jesus will leave no more room for particular friendships and family relationships. They are, again, less important. *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father, and mother, and wife and children ... and, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple"* (Luke 14:26). These are the marks of the true disciple of Jesus, who leaves everything and everyone to follow the piper.

The last assumption we make I think is the most erroneous of all. It is the belief that Jesus was so obviously the messiah – so glowing with divinity – that people fell into a spell in his presence and followed him without any hesitation. *Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.* Real disciples don't ask questions, they don't doubt, they just follow. Here is where my gut-level fear and foreboding kicks in again: this isn't right; don't follow that piper. Spiritually, you really can march off to the beat of the wrong drummer. How many parents like Zebedee have stood by helplessly, watching their children become entangled in some cult, or carried away by some overheated cause, or entwined

with some destructive lover? It's no wonder why many people today – Christians included – secretly have reservations about getting too serious with religion. Watch out for Jesus! If you see Jesus coming, hide your lunch money. If he singles you out to be a disciple, it will be at the expense of your family and your livelihood. If you let him get too close, you won't be able to resist the mesmerizing music of his piping.

These are the conclusions people have reached regarding the calling of the disciples and the life they subsequently led. I believe we can draw different conclusions. I believe we can, we should, and we must take a fresh look at what it meant to follow Christ then, and what it means to be one of his followers now, today. The first thing to say is that Jesus wasn't some Pied Piper of Galilee who appeared out of nowhere and beckoned people to follow him. He wasn't a cult leader. He didn't cast a spell over people so that they would follow him with the blank stare of a brainwashed fundamentalist. Rather, the Gospels give us enough evidence at least to consider that James and John knew Jesus well. Their mother was a woman named Salome, who many believe was Mary's sister. That would make Zebedee an uncle of Jesus, and James and John cousins of Jesus. Imagine that. Jesus came to them not as some strange mystic piping the tune, "Shall we gather at the river (Weser)?" He came to them as someone they knew.

Furthermore, although James and John left Zebedee at that moment, we see the disciples, and even Jesus himself, continuing in their family relations. Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law. You heard it right: Peter had a mother-in-law. Follow the logic, now: if Peter had a mother-in-law, then Peter had a wife. Peter and Andrew are many times listed as brothers, as are James and John. So those brotherly relations, with all the sibling rivalry, loyalty, and affection continued. James and John continued to have contact with their mother, Salome, who once asked Jesus if her two sons might sit on each side of him when he came into his glory. Such an outlandish request only begins to make sense if, in fact, Salome was Jesus' aunt. Jesus also spent much time with his mother, Mary, and with his brothers and sisters. Jesus had brothers and sisters, and while those relations were indeed strained at times, still they continued. All of their family relations continued, even though, at that moment, *they left their nets and followed Jesus*.

Finally, I believe it is unrealistic to think that the disciples never had a minute, or a day, or a week, or even a month to themselves during the three years they followed Jesus. Not only did Peter have a wife who needed attention, he also had a house and a boat that he maintained throughout his time with Jesus. Could it be that Jesus, during the three years of his ministry, would periodically call the disciples together for a specific mission or intense period of teaching and retreat, after which they would return to their homes, families, and occupations? I think it's a possibility that might account for all the varying "call" stories in the Gospels. It's a possibility that suggests Jesus called people to be his followers in the midst of their lives, not from out of their lives. The lives they were living, the families they were loving, and the trades they were practicing all mattered to Jesus. Everything from the way they conducted business, to the way they mended their nets, to the domestic chores of walking the dog and taking out the garbage, to dealing rude neighbors, to how they conducted business mattered. These were among the places where Jesus would have his followers – then and now – introduce and practice the ethics of the kingdom of God he spent so much time teaching them. The simple places. The everyday places. If they couldn't be followers of Jesus there, they probably weren't much use to him anywhere else.

So what does it mean to repent and believe the good news? You will hear from some quarters that to be a real follower of Jesus you have to give away all your money to the poor, or deliver your body to be burned, or never think a stray thought, or witness publicly to uninterested strangers, or pray without ceasing, or wear a clerical collar around your neck, or at least walk around feeling guilty about most things – if you're really a disciple. Granted, some people should walk around feeling guilty about the way they are living their lives, and Christ does call some

people to take on perilous ministries. Witness Jonah in today's Old Testament reading, whom God called to preach repentance in the great city of Nineveh. But for most of us the calling to be a disciple of Jesus happens right where we are, within the relationships we have, doing the work we are doing. No matter how ordinary, or mundane, or routine our lives may be, this is where the real ministry of Christ needs to happen. If we can't be followers of Jesus in the ordinary places, we probably aren't going to be much use to him in the extraordinary places, or anywhere else for that matter.

In the Collect of the Day we have prayed for the grace *to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ*. My hope today is that we might have cleared away some of our misunderstandings or reservations or fears about what it really entails to pray today's prayer and mean it. My hope is that we've addressed some of our hesitations that are preventing a closer walk with Jesus. Walking in his steps is not about following some mystical piper down to the river, or away to some mysterious mountain. No, when Jesus says, "Follow me," I believe he leads us to the simple places, to the everyday places, to be his disciples among the most difficult crowd of all: the people you know, the people who see you every day, the people right under your nose, all the time. There is no higher calling.

"Follow me," said Jesus to James and John, and to Peter and Andrew. "Follow me," says Jesus to you and me.

+