

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**January 22, 2012**  
**Mark 1:14-20**

**“Stay Within Earshot”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

As many of you know, I served as Dean of Religious Life and Protestant Chaplain at Mount Holyoke College for ten years before coming to the Haydenville Congregational Church to serve this congregation. While at Mount Holyoke—I assume because of my role on the campus—I was put on numerous college-wide committees...some of which were surprising. I would think: what do I have to offer to this particular committee? The strangest of all the committees I served on was the “Ethical Treatment of Animals” committee. That committee—composed of several faculty members and me—went unannounced twice a year to the basement of the Reese Psychology and Education building where they housed the animals that the Psychology professors and students performed experiments on. There were fish, mice and rats.

Once in the fall and once in the spring, the “Ethical Treatment of Animals” committee members would take our clipboards and checklists and head to Reese Hall, into the bowels of the basements. A custodian would accompany us and unlock door after door. Inside each little room we would inspect the fish tanks and the mice and rat cages. Then we would, after careful consideration, complete our checklists. Clean water? Check. Dry sawdust? Check? Ample food? Check. The list went on and somewhere near the bottom—I cannot remember the precise wording—there was a question about whether the animals seemed happy or content. That one used to stump me. How, I would wonder, can I assess whether fish are happy? The mice and rats were a challenge too. I worried: would I know if a mouse was unhappy? How would I sense if a rat was discontent?

I really stared at those fish, mice and rats. I really tried to employ the standard of due diligence. But when I got to the content question, I just checked yes, they were happy. Maybe once I wrote in the margin: “Apparently.”

I served on that committee for many years, but my ability to assess the contentment level of fish, mice and rats never increased....it really never changed. I was always stumped.

Now I have served as your pastor here at this Church for over six years and I can say that my ability to assess whether a VISITOR to our Church is content with what is happening here HAS increased over the years. I was more oblivious six years ago. People who came to worship with us for a month or two seemed to be all part of the mix, all part of the same happy pool. But then I noticed, those who really felt the Spirit of God was in this place, those who felt that the radically inclusive welcome shared weekly was meaningful, those who thought the informal, participatory worship style in our Sunday services was just fine, those who experienced the chaos during Coffee Hour as a wild and wonderful time of connection, THOSE folks were easy to assess as contented with our Church because in time many of those folks chose to formally join the church—as the five people this morning have chosen to do.

Folks who join our Church never say: This church is perfect, flawless, the place is problem-free! They do say: It's loving, it's real, it's filled with the Spirit...I want to stay, contribute and grow.

Forming community, worshipping God together, doing good work in the name of the Holy One, teaching, preaching, healing, being the family of God side-by-side for better or worse, through thick and through thin, ALL of that started with Jesus and all of it started with today's reading from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 1.

*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

*As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."*

The Church starts with those words. Community starts with those words. The fact that five new people joined our community of faith starts with those words. For Jesus did not say, "WORSHIP me." He said "Follow me." Jesus' entire ministry was done with people, surrounded by loved ones, in community—teaching, preaching, modeling how one should live...all in the context of community. Always together.

O had Jesus said, “Worship me!” O how our lives would be easier, less busy, and more solitary. We could create little home altars and worship Jesus in our living rooms. We could read our devotional books by the quiet of our own fire places, say our individual prayers, and go on with our day. O how we would have so much more time to nap, visit the mall, watch American Idol. But Jesus did not say “Worship me,” he said “Follow me” and that means two things—one: we must gather in community as Jesus himself did and commune with God together, discerning the way forward together, helping, healing, hoping together. Second: it means we must BE LIKE our Jesus—to follow him is to model our lives after his, not to hold him at arm’s length like a distant deity we do not know well.

“Follow me” Jesus said to Simon, Andrew, James and John and the others. Follow me, he told them. In the original Greek, follow me is: *Akou lou Theo Meh*. And that, *akou lou theo meh*, literally translated from the Greek means: “Stay within earshot.”

Stay within earshot. That’s what Jesus asked of his people. Stay with me, stay close, stay nearby, stay within earshot. I might need you, you might need me. Stay within earshot. That’s what Jesus wanted of his people, and that is what we want still. When people join this Church we are essentially telling them: stay within earshot...we are meant to be close, we might need you. And our sisters and brothers who join this Church are essentially telling us: “I’ll stay within earshot...we are meant to be close, I might need you. And you might need me.”

**The beauty of a vibrant, healthy and Spirit-filled Church is that God is within earshot and we listen for the word of God together. We stay within earshot of God, AND of each other. That’s a healthy community.**

Stay within earshot...so that I can lean on you when I need to, pray with you when I am in trouble, get a needed hug when I am hurting, be told God is near when I am doubting, and be reminded that I am loved when I am lonely. Stay within earshot.

A powerful image has remained in my head since I saw the A2A movie “Including Samuel.” Some twenty of us gathered last week on a cold January evening to watch a film about a young boy with Cerebral Palsy who is in a public school in a regular class and how he is included in all activities, both at home and in school. Samuel is mobile in an electrical wheelchair and with the use of a joystick, he can zip around with ease. Samuel’s older brother Isaiah is interviewed in the film about living with Samuel and how he feels about his brother. Isaiah, maybe nine years old, talks about Samuel and how loving he is and how Samuel likes hugs.

And Isaiah says this, “When Samuel wants me to hug him, he just drives his wheelchair into me over and over again until I pay attention to him and hug him.”

I think we do that as a community. We are infused with Jesus’ simple words, “Follow me” and so we drive into visitors, guests, and friends over and over again until they turn around, pay attention to what is going on here, hug and learn to love us. Many of you are here today because somehow badgered you about coming. Just ask Velma Garcia, who joined our Church today, about how Gina and Marcelle got on her case. We just drive into each other over and over again, essentially saying: follow me because I’m following him and I can show you the way.

A week ago today I did an OUTDOOR wedding, (yes outdoor wedding on that freezing cold January day) on a little hilltop on Westhampton Road in Northampton. I hurried through the ceremony because the bride, groom and twelve guests were freezing cold. I took the wedding ceremony down to the barest bones so we could descend the hill and stand by the bonfire down there. But even so, I still did not omit the line I always say in weddings, a line that is extraneous but important to me, a line tucked in a short prayer at the end of the ceremony. That simple line is: “Gracious God, we thank you for your love that lives within us and calls us from our solitary lives to companionship.”

That’s what I think “Follow me” is all about. I think we are called from our solitary, somewhat self-centered, self-involved lives into companionship, partnership with GOD and WITH ONE ANOTHER.

Dorothy Day, who started the Catholic Worker movement, said, “We have all known the long loneliness, and we have found that the answer is community.”

The answer IS community. The answer is to stay within earshot. The truth is that I can hear God more fully and more clearly when you are near. The reality is that I am a better Christian, I follow Jesus more closely, when I am with you. So stay within earshot. I need you and you need me. We simply need each other.

And so we stay within earshot because we recognize that we are each other’s life line. Ask anyone in this congregation who has faced a scary diagnosis, surgery, depression, eviction, or the long loneliness. We stay within earshot because we ARE each other’s life line.

Abba Anthony, one of the great desert dwellers wrote, “Our life and our death are with our neighbor.” And I believe that is true. At least our emotional and spiritual life and death are with our neighbor. Probably our literal life and death are as well.

Follow me Jesus said....stay within earshot. It was an invitation, maybe more than that, maybe a command. Pastor Bob Kaylor reflecting on this passage and writes: “...after making an opening declaration, Jesus extends his first invitation to discipleship. ‘Invitation’ may be too delicate a word to describe the call Jesus issues toward his future disciples... Jesus’ ‘invitation’ to discipleship is more like a command than a request. The call Jesus extends first to Simon and Andrew is to become ‘fishers of people.’ This invitation to discipleship entails more than merely sitting at the feet of the rabbi/master and passively absorbing his wisdom. ‘Fishing,’ as Simon and Andrew know, is demanding work. Jesus calls these first disciples to a new, fully engaged, and totally consuming form of discipleship. This invitation to discipleship...is no less than a call to participate in Jesus’ own mission. **Instead of offering his disciples a place at his feet, Jesus offers them a place at his side, joining with him to proclaim the good news of the kingdom that is both present and yet-to-come.**”

Follow me, stay within earshot—as opposed to sit at my feet and worship me. “Follow me”—those are among the very first words in the Gospel of Mark. And those same two words are among the very last words in the Gospel of John. In the first words Jesus speaks are: “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news....Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

In the Gospel of John, among the very last words Jesus says to his disciples in a post-resurrection appearance are simply: “Follow me.” Among the first words in one Gospel and last words in another Gospel...clearly the words “Follow me” are key to Jesus’ entire ministry. *Akou lou Theo Meh.*

Follow me means you can leave behind whatever distracts you from seeking justice, loving your neighbor, caring for the poor, and turning the world upside down so it looks right-side up from God’s perspective. Follow me means stay close because we have a better chance of creating the kingdom of God on earth if we tackle this work together.

Worshipping Jesus is good. Following Jesus is better. And harder.

In his little book *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis says he envisions hell as a realm in which people are forever moving farther away from one another.

I envision heaven as a place where we stay within earshot and bump into each other over and over again until we get all the hugs we need.

My beloved sisters and brothers...we are following Jesus together. We are praying, singing, serving, working, healing and acting together to create the kingdom of God on earth. I need God and I need you. So please: stay within earshot. Amen.

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