

One day, Jesus was walking along. He saw Matthew at his tax collecting booth and said, "Follow me." I would say this is primarily how we view Jesus. He was the leader who called people to follow him. When he walked by the Sea of Galilee and saw Peter, Andrew, James, and John in their fishing boats, he called to them. Immediately, they left their nets and followed.

Why those guys dropped everything and followed Jesus so quickly is a bit of a mystery. I might have asked a couple of questions. Who are you? Where are we going? How much time do I have to decide? The fact that none of them asked any questions only demonstrates how amazing Jesus was as a leader.

I used to have a book in which the author analyzed the leadership qualities Jesus demonstrated in the Gospels and painstakingly applied them to leadership in the business world. It was titled *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership*.

The fact is we place a very high value on leadership capability. For anyone filling out a college application, it's probably a good idea to highlight your leadership skills. In order for a Boy Scout to achieve the highest honor in scouting, that of Eagle Scout, they have to demonstrate leadership. We want our young men to be leaders.

In fact, this is how the church has traditionally gone about its ministry. Just as Jesus said to Matthew, "Follow me," the church has said to the world, "Follow us." Come join us. These are the programs we offer and the activities we do. Come and take part. We'll teach you. We'll take the lead. Follow us.

But honestly, that's not working so well these days. People don't trust institutions like they once did. Most don't wander into churches looking for answers to life's questions. Unlike Matthew, unlike Peter and Andrew, James and John, when we say "follow us," today's world doesn't immediately drop everything and follow.

If you're anything like me, you recognize Jesus as your leader. Actually, I tend to self-identify as "a follower of Jesus," rather than as a Christian. There are too many Christians out there with whom I don't want to be identified. But I want to suggest to you that one thing that made Jesus such a magnificent leader was his willingness to be led. He demonstrated that following is an important feature of leadership.

Look what happens in our reading today. He saw Matthew at his tax booth and said, "Follow me." Immediately, Matthew got up and followed. The very next scene takes place at Matthew's house. The translation in our pew Bible doesn't specify the owner of the house.

Some translations read, "While Jesus was having dinner *at Matthew's house*, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples." So, Jesus called Matthew to follow him, but they ended up at Matthew's house. How did that happen? I've never really thought about how Jesus got to Matthew's house.

We might assume he magically knew where Matthew lived. Then, Matthew followed Jesus all the way to *his own* house. I think a more realistic explanation is that Jesus took an interest in Matthew. At some point, Jesus said, “Matthew, show me where you live. Take me to your house.” Or Matthew invited him to dinner and Jesus accepted.

Jesus didn’t have to accept those kinds of invitations. We know from the story of the “loaves and fishes” that, even in a desolate place, Jesus could provide for his own dinner and then some. He didn’t need to go to Matthew’s home, but he recognized that engaging in his ministry sometimes required letting the other step in front, to be a guest.

In recent years, I went with one church on a service trip to Haiti. With another church, I went to Nicaragua. In both cases, our hosts wanted us to take a day and see something of their country. In Haiti they wanted to take us to a place in the mountains to show us some environmental initiatives they were developing. In Nicaragua they wanted us to go to the ocean and have a nice meal together.

In both cases, there was some hesitation in the group about taking a day just to see the sights. We went there to help people. We wanted to work. The local people knew that what would help them, in the long run, is for us to fall in love with their country. They wanted to build a relationship. For those service trips to be successful, the local people needed to take the lead. We needed to simply accept their invitation.

We had money and know how, but they had a perspective we didn’t have. I was thinking about that television show *Undercover Boss*. That’s the one where the CEO of a company disguises herself and goes to work as an entry-level employee.

Sitting in a corporate office, a CEO can’t know what’s going on in their business, on the ground. They don’t have the perspective. On *undercover boss*, the head of the company puts on a disguise and works under the supervision of others. In so doing, they’re able to diagnose problems that need to be fixed and to better care for their employees. I believe Jesus allowed himself to be led, because otherwise he would not have the perspective needed to engage in his ministry.

Jesus allowed himself to be led twice in our reading today. Both times it was controversial. As he sat in Matthew’s house many tax collectors and sinners sat with him. Jesus overheard the Pharisees asked the disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” He went on to say, “For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

During the meal, a leader in the synagogue came and begged him, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” How did Jesus respond? He said, “Lead the way.” The text says, “And Jesus got up and followed him.”

The Pharisees had a problem with the fact that Jesus hung around with tax collectors and sinners. Others, including Jesus’ own disciples, may have had a problem with Jesus responding to a leader in the synagogue in order to touch his dead daughter. But that’s

what Jesus did. He accepted invitations. He said, "I'm willing to go to your place, even though others think it's a bad place to go."

I responded to an invitation last Sunday. I know that gun violence is a hot button issue, but a group called Mom's Demand Action hosted a march that went over the Memorial Bridge from Kittery to Portsmouth to bring awareness about gun violence. I decided to just show up and hear what they had to say.

I literally got into line and followed the leaders of this event across the bridge. It culminated with a program at the Unitarian church in Portsmouth. The mayor of Portsmouth spoke along with a number of other politicians. I learned a lot. The Portsmouth schools had more days off this year due to active shooter threats than it had snow days. Gun violence is the leading cause of death for US children and teens.

A senior at Portsmouth High described participating in active shooter drills since she was in elementary school. She urged the audience to never view active shooter drills in schools as normal. I needed to hear that perspective. I learned a lot by just showing up. I'm realizing that accepting invitations is an important feature of my leadership.

Whose invitation do we need to accept? I'm convinced the days are numbered for any church that proclaims, "Follow us" and waits for people to come through their doors. The church that leads today is the church that will accept invitations. It will be the church that says, "I want to follow you. Take me to where you live. Tell me what I need to know about your struggles."

What I want to leave you with today is this. Whatever is going on in your home, don't keep it from Jesus. If it's full of sinners like Matthew's home, if death and loss has made it sad like the home of the leader in the synagogue, whatever mess you're dealing with at your house, know that Jesus accepts invitations. He'll go anywhere that healing and restoration is needed.

Just lead the way!