Can you name the four Beatles? Of course, John, Paul, George and Ringo! What about some groups from this generation? Can you name the members of a group from this generation? You will have to help me on that one.

How about another band of brothers? Can you name the 12 disciples? Philip, and he brought his buddy Nathaniel. Andrew, who brought his brother Simon Peter. Have another Simon - Simon the Zealot. Another pair of brothers, James and John. Another James, the son of Alphaeus; Matthew the tax collector; Thomas the doubter; Thaddaeus who was also called Judas the son of James; Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus. When he committed suicide, Matthias was chosen to replace him.

Reading through gospels you will see that Jesus had more than just twelve. Jesus also sent out the 72 in pairs to preach. The Apostle Paul tells us that Jesus appeared to more than 500 of his disciples at one time after his resurrection from the dead.

What is a disciple? The Greek word means someone who follows and learns. In Jesus’ day, a disciple followed a rabbi and believed in his teachings and had the desire to learn more.

You are Jesus’ disciples. Just as Jesus called his disciples, he called you and me to be his disciples through Holy Baptism. Through water and the Word the Holy Spirit created faith in your heart. Faith believes everything that Jesus taught. Faith follows everything Jesus taught. Faith has the desire to learn more about Jesus’ teachings. Jesus said: You are truly my disciples if you follow my teachings. Yes, we’re Jesus’ disciples. We follow him. This morning through Luke’s gospel, the Holy Spirit reminds us that DISCIPLES FOLLOW JESUS FIRST. Away from the world and to serve in the kingdom.

Luke begins: As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. Jesus had just shown his glory to Peter, James and John on the mount of Transfiguration. Now he and his disciples were traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem, where he would suffer and die. He resolutely set out, that is, he was determined to go and fulfill his goal. As he made his way through the country he called sinners to repent, to believe on him as the Messiah.

He had to travel through the region of Samaria. The Samaritans were a people who retained elements of the Jewish faith, but differed in some essential beliefs. An intense hatred developed over the years between Samaritans and Jews. The disciples whom Jesus sent ahead to prepare his way received a hostile reception. Maybe they rejected disciples because they were Jews. Maybe it was their preaching that Jesus is the Messiah. Whatever the cause for their hostility, James and John wanted to call on God to reign down the fire of judgment.

The rebuke they received from Jesus was meant to teach them that being a disciple of Jesus means following him first. Discipleship does not include a sinful inclination to get revenge, to make sure that those who reject our Savior suffer. Did they deserve God’s wrath and punishment for their unbelief? Yes, but not any more than we do for our sins.

Instead of praying that God would have mercy on unbelievers and lead them to repentance, how many times have we secretly wished that God would destroy this group or that group of people who reject the true God, who make a mockery of God's laws, that he would destroy those who sin against us and offend and hurt our loved ones by their blasphemy of our Jesus? That is not following Jesus first, is it?

There were others who wanted to join the band of disciples. A man approached Jesus and said: I will follow you wherever you go. Did the man fully understand what it meant to follow Jesus wherever he went? Jesus replied: Foxes have dens and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. Jesus had no home. We find him at the
home of Peter and Andrew, of Mary and Martha. He was supported by the generosity of others. Even in his death, he was buried in someone else’s tomb. His first goal was not to seek days of comfort and live a convenient life, but first to seek and save the lost, and that meant doing without at times.

Jesus is not saying that we sell our homes and possessions and give it all to the church and live on the street. He is talking about our attitude toward our possessions and stuff. Since we follow Jesus first, what comes first in our lives? The money we set aside for God’s kingdom through our offerings or the money we set aside for our kingdom, our stuff, our luxuries?

Jesus called to another: Follow me! But the man replied: Lord, first let me go and bury my father. Jesus replied: Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God. Wasn’t this a little cold-hearted on the part of Jesus? Not at all. Jesus was teaching this man to distance himself from the unbelieving world. In other words, let the dead, that is, the spiritual dead, the unbelievers, bury the unbelievers. He was to do something more important - proclaim the kingdom of God to those who are still living.

Jesus’ point here is again about conflicting loyalties. Is our first commitment to proclaiming the kingdom of God or to the unbelieving world? Either I am committed to God’s definition of marriage or what the Supreme Court’s ruled. Either I am committed to the truth that God is the one who made our bodies and therefore tells us how to use them or I am committed to the world’s philosophy which says I choose what to do with my body. Where is your first loyalty?

Another man said to Jesus: I will follow you Lord; but first let me go back and say good-by to my family. Seems like an valid request, but Jesus replied: No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God. Jesus’ point is that his disciples, who are committed to kingdom work, cannot let anyone, even their closest relatives and dearest friends, prevent them or hinder them from carrying out this higher responsibility.

How many times have we allowed our company from out-of-town determine what we do on Sunday morning? How many times have we not invited a friend or coworker to church because we are afraid of what might happen to the relationship? What is more important: the relationship we have with them or the relationship they might have with their Savior?

Jesus says: Disciples follow me first. How many times have we said: But Lord, let me do this first… Jesus’ reply to us: What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

My friends, with repentant hearts, let us humbly follow Jesus away from the world. Let us resolutely set out for Jerusalem and see what Jesus has done for us.

Jesus was not only the Teacher, but also a disciple. He followed his Father’s will. His will is that his Son make the saving of lost souls his number one priority. Even if that meant not calling down fire from heaven on those who rejected him, as we might do, but rather to reach out to them again and again with love. Even if that meant becoming poor, going without, his priority was to make us rich by his obedience to the Father. Even if it meant his relationship with his family was awkward, which it was at times - they thought he was out of his mind. He made his relationship with his Father most important in his life. He put his hand to the plow and did not look back.

We need to understand that picture. Today we have farm machinery that sets the lines of crops in a field nice and straight. In Jesus’ day, and many countries around the world today, a farmer would hitch his plow to a pair of oxen or mules who would pull the plow across the earth, the farmer used his hand to guide the direction of the plow, he cannot look back. He must devote all of his attention to his goal.

Jesus put his hand to the plow and did not look back, but kept his gaze on the goal, Jerusalem, and all the way to the cross - a cross filled with pain and suffering, for our sins of misplaced priorities. Even though we do not think of Jesus first, he thought of us first. Even though we do not always make him our first priority, he committed himself to us and to saving us for our sins. He forfeited his life for you and me.

Because of Jesus’ perfect commitment to the Father and to us, the Father committed self to
us. He made you his number one priority. The proof is at the baptismal font, where he washed you of your sins with Jesus’ obedience. There the Father proved his faithfulness to you, by forgiving you yours sins. There he called you away from the spiritually dead unbelieving world, to life and faith and belief in his Son Jesus. He called you to a new world, the new Jerusalem, which waits for you.

As disciples of Jesus, we do not look back, but firmly fix our eyes on the goal, heaven. That will be our first priority as disciples of Jesus: making sure our loyalty is to the kingdom of God. We will place our hands on the plow and point our eyes toward the kingdom and serving in it.

Following Jesus first means focusing on the gospel, not zealous punishment of those who reject the gospel. Our prayer for those who oppose the gospel, who are blind to the truth, who attack our faith and our Jesus, is that they hear the good news of Jesus, repent, be saved, and join us as disciples of Jesus through faith. That is what disciples who follow Jesus first do.

Following Jesus first also means going without. Remember Zacchaeus? He was hated by his own people because he collected taxes for the Roman government. Jesus changed his heart. Zacchaeus became a follower and responded: Here and now Lord I give half of my possessions to the poor. If I have cheated, I will pay back four times the amount!

As disciples who follow Jesus first, we will make our first priority, not our comfort, leisure and luxury, but continue to reevaluate: How can I use the gifts from God, my money and possessions, to expand the kingdom here and abroad? What can I do to make sure this ministry continues?

Following Jesus first also means priority, not conflicting loyalties with the unbelieving world. Even if the government tries to redefine marriage, even if society tries to tell us we can do whatever we want with our bodies, our first priority is to God and his definition of marriage, life, and Christian living. Our loyalty is to his Word, which is the ultimate authority. And as disciples, we are ok with that. God leads. We follow. We humbly and happily obey, because we know that his will is best for our lives.

Our responsibility will be to know what his will is for our lives, to know what his Word says. Like Mary, who sat down at Jesus’ feet, we will listen to the Teacher every day. Our priority is not what the world thinks but what our loving Father says.

Finally, following Jesus first means loyalty to our Heavenly Father, not to family and friends. It sounds harsh and unloving? What’s more important than knowing Jesus and having a relationship with him? What is more important than family or friends who follow Christ together, who gather together for worship and Bible study and home devotions - who encourage each other to keep their hand on the plow, to keep their gaze fixed on the cross and empty tomb, to resolutely march toward the New Jerusalem. Nothing is more important than that - because we are disciples who follow Jesus first, away from this sinful world, to work in God’s kingdom. God grant us the strength and will to do it. Amen.

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