

Are We Actually Following Jesus?

Matthew 4:12-23

(Two notes as we begin: I rarely put sermons into a three-point structure, but this sermon has three points but no poem. In addition, to encourage you to read with me the book *The Peaceable Kingdom*, most of the references in this sermon are from that book.)

As a child I loved the hymn, "Follow, follow, I will follow Jesus." Like Mary's little lamb, anywhere that Jesus went, I was sure to follow. One day it dawned on me that my Jesus never went anywhere except to church and back home again. He insisted that we go to church at least three times a week, especially on Sunday night no matter how badly we wanted to stay home and watch *Bonanza*. Our Jesus was white, really angry about Civil Rights, supported the KKK, believed in guns, was opposed to seminary education, but loved dinner on the ground, all day singing, and protracted meetings. He read only the King James Version of the Holy Bible, and insisted every word, comma, and period, including the chapter and verse numbers were literal. He didn't like Catholics (even though there wasn't a single Catholic in our entire community). He didn't care for Germans or Japanese (because of WWII). He was a big believer in hell and was always on the lookout for any one smoking, drinking, or dancing. Unlike the Methodists, who had Coke and cookies at their Vacation Bible School, my stern Baptist Jesus believed in Nabisco saltine crackers and Kool-Aid.

Only later did I realize that most of us follow some image of Jesus we have concocted in our minds. It's as if there is a Build-A-Jesus store in the mall and we get to make our own Jesus. I had no idea that I was living out the philosopher Fierbach's claim that religion is the projection of mankind's hopes written large. And I also didn't realize how superficial it was. A self-made Jesus turns out to be a sorry building project.

The question before us today: Are we actually following Jesus? Let's put it this way: The church needs more than a GPS if we are going to really follow Jesus.

One day Jesus came walking by the sea and said, "Follow me". Andrew, Peter, James, and John decided to attach their fate to the passionately humble teacher. The persuasiveness of Jesus hung in the air with an authenticity that was beyond criticism.

Since the fishermen immediately left their boats and followed Jesus, we can assume they felt "the strong attraction of a good man's gravitational pull." Over the next three years these veteran fishermen would watch Jesus pull others into "his orbit as gracefully as a fly fisherman casting toward a still pool in a cold mountain stream" (Pat Conroy, *My Reading Life*).

Then of all things, Jesus says, "I will make you fishers of men and women." Following Jesus means being his witnesses. "As Christians we believe that peace is most perfectly realized as we learn to tell God's story." (We are, after all, a storytelling people.) Story creates tradition and together they create a community of faith. "Moreover God has charged us with the particular responsibility of being his

representatives to attract others to that story of peace by manifesting it in our common life.” (Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*). It is both our privilege and responsibility to tell God’s story.

The meaning of witness is telling the alternative story that this world is the creation of a good God who is known through the people of Israel and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “Without such a witness we only abandon the world to the violence derived from the lies that devour our lives” (Hauerwas, *TPK*). If we don’t keep telling the story and building the tradition, communities fall apart.

Witnessing is not public grandstanding. The governor of Alabama kicked up a storm last week by announcing that non-Christians were not his brothers and sisters. It was inappropriate and unnecessary. He has apologized, but I remind Governor Bentley that Jesus called the poor, the naked, the hungry, the prisoners, the sick, the lepers, the prostitutes, the robbers, and the tax collectors his brothers and sisters

His remarks remind me of a college acquaintance standing on a table, during dinner, at a local restaurant and preaching at the top of his lungs. The manager threw us all out even though I protested, “We weren’t preaching; we came for the crawfish etouffee.” Later, in a chapel service, my preacher pal interrupted a Baptist history professor’s lecture on Baptist Heritage day and shouted, “Excuse me, could you say something about Jesus?” Such grandstanding is inappropriate whether expressed by naïve religious studies majors or seasoned political veterans. Christians should at least have good manners. After chapel someone politely informed the preacher boy, “Jesus wouldn’t treat a guest like that.” People who disagree with fellow Christians are not pagans in need of prayer, heathens bound for hell, or socialists in need of salvation. As Kierkegaard said, “When you label me, you negate me.”

Following Jesus also requires RIGOROUS TRAINING. Jesus says, “I will make you.” What a thought: We are “made” Christian men and women; not for a Mafia don but as disciples of the true Savior of the world. That one phrase suggests the lifelong training necessary for discipleship. And this is especially true of worship. “Because the Christian story is an enacted story, liturgy is probably a much more important resource than are doctrines or creeds for” training in discipleship. For example, that training will develop in us the capacity to love worship rather than be bored by it. Boredom is not a sign of poor preaching, although poor preaching may be a contributing factor. Boredom is the result of a lack of training in the skills of worship. In order for worship to be the single most important act of resistance to the power of evil, we must have our desires transformed and that requires long training. And entertainment is not resistance. As Queen Victoria allegedly said, “If all the people who go to sleep in church were laid end to end they would be a lot more comfortable.”

Church members who wonder why they need training have never questioned why an untrained church shoots its own wounded. If all we need is to show up at church with a batch of private theological opinions picked up on religious television, or the inadequate theology of a talk show host, we will not need skills for that. But if we want to sustain our faith and the church, we are going to need skills. None of us are as good at this as we need to be.

Discipleship training should be as intense as basic training for the military, as hard as practice for National Football players, as difficult as final exams for Ph. D. students. In the outrageous spoof, *Knight and Day*, Tom Cruise keeps repeating to his co-star, “You have skills.” Well, we must “develop

disciplined skills through initiation into that community that attempts to live faithful to the story of God.” For example, no one can just forgive enemies. It is self-serving for a preacher to smile indulgently and say, “Love your enemies,” as if he is asking us to love our mothers. To love enemies is a high level spiritual skill.

Jesus brought training and skills to his wilderness contest with evil far exceeding those of a Jedi warrior. Listen, you can’t go one on one with the evil empire and survive without godly skills. Church casualty lists are heart-breaking. Nationwide, 1,600 ministers a month are forced to resign their pulpits. More than 60% of church members quit the church. We are a wounded, battered, army with flags dragging in the dust like the scarred, emaciated ghosts of the Confederacy returning home. A certain kind of people is required to sustain the church over time – a people of character and virtue. We need skills. As Baptists we have such a predisposed determination to be saved by grace alone that we have neglected training in the virtues. This may account for us having more characters than people with character.

We especially need skill with the Bible. The Bible invites argument and disagreement. Jacob bargains with God; Job argues with God; Jonah disagrees with God. If we think the Bible always agrees with us, then we are reading badly and interpreting wrongly. Frankly, there are texts in the Bible that should blow our minds. Reading this book should, at times, elicit from our lips: “Forgive me, Lord, for I am sinner;” “Lord have mercy;” “I believe help my unbelief;” as well as some more down to earth expressions like, “Are you kidding me?” “Say it ain’t so, Jesus.” Or as a Baptist deacon faced with Scripture’s condemnation of racism said, “I don’t care what the Bible says.” The Bible forces us to examine every facet of our lives and beliefs. We need Bible skills.

Following Jesus means serving the constituency that Jesus served. We can call this PRACTICAL SERVICE: feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoners. Here are 6 primary mission practices for Christian churches. Jesus healed people with unclean spirits, lepers, paralytics, a man with a withered hand, a man tortured by mental demons, the mentally diseased, children sick and dying, the blind, the lame, the deaf, and a boy with epilepsy. Do we get the picture? Following Jesus means serving Jesus’ people.

Patience is a required virtue if we are to serve the needy people of Jesus. To follow Jesus is to have the skill to wait with him in a world of hunger, idolatry, and war. Following Jesus offers an alternative time to a world that believes we have no time to be just or that we can’t afford to be just. We have the time to feed our neighbors and keep working on solutions to world-wide hunger, health care, and poverty. The hungry man with his hand out is our Jesus. The single mom needing health care for her children – she’s our Jesus. There’s all this need.

Following Jesus means faithful witness, rigorous training, and practical service. So, you tell me. Are we following Jesus?