

Psalm 91: 9-16
Mark 10:35-45

“Faith is in the Following”

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Have you ever noticed that when we come to church for worship, we are reminded on a weekly basis as to how we have fallen short in being disciples, instead of being reminded of the ways we ARE disciples? The usual structure of our order for worship begins with a Call to Worship, a few songs of praise, and then we always turn to Confession of Sin. Again today, we have admitted to God, we have “not lived for your glory.” That’s like saying we are delighted to be in this place before the presence of God; but then we immediately go into a list composed by David Letterman of “Ten reasons you are not really a Christian, even though you thought you were before you came to church this morning.”

Now don’t take this wrong – I still affirm our Reformed Theology which states we are all the products of “original sin.” We are all sinners who are guilty of falling short of God’s created and intended expectations and purpose for us. So we do need to confess our sins before God – to clean the slate so that we can hear and respond to God’s fresh new word for us this day. It’s just that sometimes I fear that we approach our discipleship with our cups “half full” – you know ... feeling that we cannot and will not get any better – that we will never live up to our full potential and God’s calling.

And that is why today, I want us to focus on the idea of “following Jesus.” Why? Because, if you will notice, there never seems to be a point in the gospels when Jesus says to his disciples, “BELIEVE the following 5 things about me”, or “DO the following ten tasks,” or “complete this form in triplicate and have it signed by your pastor” – and then you will be my sanitized, sanctified, certified disciples.” Rather, what he said was just, “Follow me!” Apparently, by that constant, open invitation and reminder, Jesus thinks it is more important to be on a journey toward discipleship, than it is to ever claim we have arrived.

Christianity is not a set of beliefs, principles and propositions that we carefully check off the list for certification, and then we are admitted. Our faith is not some sort of secret formula or magic prescription that we carefully follow. It is the process of discipleship – an activity of “following.” Faith in Jesus is not just stating a host of beliefs ABOUT Jesus: It is a willingness and dedication to “following” Jesus. Thus, the faith is in the following!

I think we make a mistake when we try to turn his clear, direct invitation into a mystery. Jesus never demanded that we swallow a dozen of more philosophical or theological propositions in order to be his. Faith does not require the prerequisite of having to FEEL something. And faith does not require every believer to have a blinding-light, Damascus Road experience. Faith is the willingness to stumble along behind Jesus; it is a willingness to walk behind him, and not to always be sure of where he is going, hence where he is taking us. Faith is in the following.

There is therefore no need for anybody to be anxious or befuddled when asked, “Are you a Christian?” The answer is easy – it is a freebie. The answer is not in being able to give a detailed answer to the meaning of atonement. We are not required to defend a fully-developed systematic theology, nor to quote at least ten psalms from memory. The answer is to simply say, “Yes! I’m doing my best to follow Jesus. I am his apprentice. I am his disciple.” The faith is present and apparent in the following.

To further illustrate, if we were to ask someone, “Are you a carpenter?” there would be no hesitation in our being able to answer that question – we either are or we are not . . . We may not be the world’s best carpenter, or we may have never done any carpentry at all. It could be that we have been a carpenter for only a couple of weeks; or perhaps we may have been an experienced carpenter for 30 years. The evidence that a person either is or is not a carpenter is self-evident – we are either disciplining our lives to the skills, insights and practices of carpentry, or we are not.

But if we were to ask, “Are you a good carpenter?” then there may be more hesitation in the reply. A person might be growing in skill, but not be skilled enough to feel comfortable claiming the title as a carpenter. The hesitation does not mean the person is not a real carpenter. Rather the hesitation reflects that the person is still growing in experience, still learning the tools of the trade.

But even a beginning carpenter is still a carpenter! And even a beginning disciple of Jesus is still a disciple. The measure of discipleship is in the willingness to follow.

I don’t know about you, but I have always been somewhat uncomfortable with some of the ways in which we disciples sometimes speak of our relationship to our Lord. I’ve heard the phrase used, “Since I accepted Jesus . . .” “Accept-ed Jesus” (past tense) makes it sound like the person has received something fixed **and permanent. It is sort of like there is the one-time decision and now it is all over.**

Or maybe you have heard others say, “When I was sav-ed ...” Again the past tense makes it seem like salvation was only a past event; as if that moment in the person’s relationship with God is sealed in stone. Wouldn’t be more appropriate to say, “When I started walking with Jesus ...” or “When I began my journey with Jesus ...”? Those statements indicate that the relationship has a continuing element to it. And that matches with the earliest name given to the followers of Jesus, who according to the Book of Acts were known as “people of the Way.” So faith is in the continued following.

When we read the gospel of Mark, we might get the impression that Jesus has made some kind of mistake by calling the wrong people to be his followers. His disciples rarely, if ever, get the point of understanding him. In the text for today we are presented with two of Jesus’ closest disciples, James and John, who are discussing which one of them was going to sit at the right hand – the position of honor and importance – when Jesus comes into his glory. The other disciples get angry at James and John for trying to acquire this special favor from Jesus. By this time they have been with Jesus for about three years, observing and participating in his ministry, listen to his teaching – but they still don’t get it. So has them all sit down AGAIN and reminds them that greatness in the Kingdom of God has to do with being servants – of being last, not first!

How often in the gospels do we find Jesus chastising and criticizing his disciples? Surely, he must have been exasperated that they just don’t get the point, and thereby fail to follow. How many times are the disciples portrayed as being clueless – just plain clueless?

But Jesus’ frustrations and criticism of them does not mean they are not true disciples. He knows they are both literally and figuratively on a journey with him; they are still “on the way.” If they had not committed themselves to follow, if they were not linked to him and his way, there would be no need for correction and further explanation. Faith does not mean that they have arrived; it means they are still on the way.

Reformer Martin Luther, reminds us that the crucified God seems to be attracted to the weak, the lowly, the bewildered and the needy. In Luther’s own words from his “Lectures in Galatians”: *“God is the God of the humble, the miserable, the oppressed and the desperate, and of those who have been brought down to nothing at all.” “It is the nature of God to exult the humble, to feed the hungry, to enlighten the blind, to comfort the miserable and afflicted, to justify sinners, to give life to the dead, and to save those who are desperate....”*

Christians, you see, are not those who are morally better than other people, or more perceptive, or more intelligent. Christians are rather those who have heard their names called, who have sensed that a party was about to begin, and want to be a part of it. Christians are those who know that the poet Auden meant when he said, *“I know nothing, except what everyone knows – if (I’m) there when God dances, I should dance.”*

I have met a lot of brilliant people who follow Jesus. And from what I have observed, their decision to follow was not necessarily the result of some reasoned process derived from their intelligence. It was a matter of being encountered in the depths of their being. It was a matter of choosing to take up the Christian life, adopting the habits and practices of discipleship. It was being intentional about going to church, reading the scriptures, praying and serving those in need.

Pascal was right when he said, “If you would be a believer, just go and do the things that believers do.” To quote him in more detail: *“You desire to attain faith, but you do not know the way? You would like to cure your unbelief, and you ask for remedies? (Well,) learn from those who were once bound and gagged like you, and who now stake all that they possess (in the gospel). Follow the way by which THEY set out, acting as if they already believed ... all of this will naturally cause you to believe.”*

A person who wants to become a carpenter must apprentice to be a carpenter. The apprentices’ job is to carefully mind the moves and instructions of the master carpenter – must be attentive to the principles of the trade – must be willing to be corrected and criticized by the master until the apprentice can become a reflection of the master, and do what the master does. Surely, that is what Jesus meant when he simply says, “Follow me.”

I remember back in the early 70’s when I attended a retreat where I participated in a discussion where we were asked, “When did you become a Christian?” Have you ever been involved in one of those discussions? In our group, people took turns sharing what turned out to be some rather dramatic accounts of how and when they answered to the Christian faith. Some could remember vividly that soul-stirring moment when their lives were dramatically disrupted by an infusion the power and grace of God. From that point onward, they decided to follow – and they had continued to follow ever since.

I was beginning to feel a bit timid – embarrassed maybe – or was it cheated, because I had not had such a dramatic experience – that clearly identifiable moment - in my faith journey. Then the man whose turn was just before mine, **began with some hesitation in his voice and said, “I ... I can’t remember when I**

wasn't a Christian." "I grew up in a Christian home, so I was a Christian as a child – from my very first day." I was glad he spoke first, because his experience was reflective of my own, and is probably reflective of many of yours as well. We have been on this journey to follow Jesus from the very beginning.

The way we got on this journey is not the crucial matter. What matters is recognizing we are "on the way", and want to continue to be "on the way." To be "on the way" means the admission that we are not perfect, and never will be; but as disciples we are busy imitating the moves of the Master in what we do.

Wherever we are, whatever we do we are apprentices of the faith - we are disciples of Jesus. Following Jesus is not a matter of learning a few religious tricks on top of the other things we can do. It is a matter of doing all that we do, not for ourselves, but for our Master. Surely, that is why all of Jesus' parables are about real life, and why all his teaching is about matters like anger, forgiveness, injustice and disappointment. He is always teaching us and leading us through the real stuff of life – showing us the way....

An old Chinese proverb states, "The journey is its own reward." To be a Christian means we are to be someone who is on a journey WITH JESUS. It doesn't mean we will know or understand everything about the Christian faith; nor does it mean we will ever achieve perfection – the perfection of our Master. But it does mean we are apprentices who are open to learning – disciples ready to follow. We are those who have heard his call and have committed our lives to follow.

And just so we know ... the world is right in judging Jesus on the basis of the sort of lives he produces among his followers. The only proof there is for truth of his way - the only acid test for the validity of the gospel - is whether or not the gospel is capable of producing lives that are a credit to our Lord and Master. For the world carefully watches us to see, if our faith is apparent in our following. Amen.