

## Following Jesus

H. Stephen Shoemaker

September 30, 2018

The minister was preparing his sermon for the next day in his study at the parsonage next to the church. The text was from I Peter (2:21):

For to this you have been called because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

His name was Henry Maxwell, and as he worked on the sermon the doorbell rang and a shabbily dressed man stood there. He was looking for work. The minister said as kindly as he could that he was sorry but had no work to offer him. The man went on his way, and the pastor returned to his study.

The next day at First Church he delivered the sermon with great eloquence. The congregation nodded its approval. Then the same shabbily dressed man appeared, came down the aisle and began his speech to the congregation.

He told the stunned congregation that he'd been out of work for ten months, and that ever since he had been wandering from city to city looking for

work. He said he'd been in their city for three days with no luck finding work and that he had received no kindness or sympathy except from their pastor the day before. He told them that he was somewhat confused by the lack of concern of good Christian people toward people like him.

What I feel puzzled about [he said], is what is meant by following Jesus.

What do you mean when you say, "I'll go with him, with him all the way?"

He spoke a few more words then collapsed on the floor. He was carried to the pastor's house where he could rest for a few days. During that week, to everyone's surprise and shock, the man died.

The next Sunday Maxwell got up to preach, deeply shaken by the events of the week. The man's unexpected entrance in his life, his question; "What do you mean by following Jesus?" and his sudden death had placed a question mark over everything in the pastor's life and ministry.

In the sermon he confessed his shakiness then offered a challenge to the congregation: for anyone there to join him in a spiritual experiment. For one year they would agree together to do nothing without first asking the question, "what would Jesus do?" and then follow, no matter what the result. He said,

I will of course include myself in this company of volunteers, and shall take for granted that my church will not be surprised at my future conduct, as based on this standard of judgment.

A core group responded, including the editor of the city's paper, the owner of a business, a home maker and a music teacher. Their key question, "What would Jesus do? And their goal: To act accordingly regardless of immediate results. It had two important requirements: 1) The time commitment of one year; and 2) The commitment to meet weekly or a small group for mutual support, accountability and guidance.

## I

You may have recognized by now the story. It is Charles Sheldon's 1896 novel and spiritual classic, *In His Steps*. In its novelistic form it was an expression of the arising social Gospel movement, a movement to extend the transformation Jesus offers from personal transformation to social transformation. Sin and salvation were not only personal but also social. Its theme has had a recent revival. Christian bookstores have sold WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) bracelets.

I read it first as a young minister and put it quickly aside. It was a nice enough book, but it seemed a bit simplistic and sentimental. I re-read it in mid-

life and mid-career and it felt like a brand new book. The simplicity of its question drove itself home to my heart and mind. I now read it as the story of a mid-life spiritual crisis in the life of a minister. Maybe the book is best read after the age of 40!

There are times in our lives when we are given what one has called “the simplicity on the yonder side of complexity.” *This* side of complexity it is often just simplistic. We have gone through the complexities, lived the questions and now have been given the grace of a simplicity on the yonder side of complexity. The Shakers sing about it:

Tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free,  
Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be,  
and when we find ourselves in the place just right  
twill be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained  
to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed.  
To turn, turn will be our delight  
til by turning, turning we come round right.

In his spiritual classic, *A Testament of Devotion*, Thomas R. Kelly wrote:

The last fruit of holy obedience is the simplicity of the trusting child..It is the simplicity which lies beyond complexity. It is the naiveté which is the yonder side of sophistication.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur called it the “second naiveté.” After we’ve passed through life’s complexities and lived the questions we take a leap of faith and give ourselves over to God’s great story.

*The question, “What would Jesus Do?” is not as easy to answer as it sounds, not by a long shot. But I do not think we can go far with Jesus without first asking the question.*

It may trouble you before it saves you. Mark Twain once quipped: “It’s not the parts of the Bible I don’t understand that give me trouble, but the parts of the Bible I do understand!”

Your answer to the question is *your* answer, not someone else’s answer, an answer found in the deepest parts of you. It may take you to Fifth Street Ministries, or to City Hall, or to the streets to protest injustice. It may take you to a deepened ministry of prayer, or to choir practice, or to the care of children. When you hear the question and follow the answer you will be on your way with Jesus. Your life will feel like it has slipped into its right groove.

I do not profess to being a good follower of Jesus, but I'm trying. And I do not let my failures embarrass me so that I give up on the journey. Famous Southern writer Flannery O'Connor said of the religious South that it is not so much "Christ-Centered" as "Christ-Haunted." That describes me some days: I've stumbled in my following but can't get him out of my mind.

I like theologian Dallas Willard's suggestion that the word "apprentice" is a good word for disciple. An apprentice is always learning from the master. An apprentice he writes

...is simply someone who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become capable of doing what this person does or to become what that person is.

I think one of the "appropriate conditions" is a community who are seriously asking the question, "What Would Jesus Do?", who has been engaged in a long conversation with Jesus.

I know churches whose preaching gravitates to the Old Testament and the letters of Paul. The gospels take a back seat. When they preach about Jesus it is about his redemptive work on the cross rather than his teaching and ministry. It's like the Apostles Creed which skips from "born of the Virgin Mary"

to “suffered under Pontius Pilate” leap-frogging over the life and teachings of Jesus.

I think it important to read and preach from the gospels most every Sunday. It keeps our conversation with Jesus alive.

As I said, answering the question “What Would Jesus Do?” is not as easy as it sounds. It requires the work of the *mind, imagination, an openness to the Spirit and community.*

The mind seeks the original meaning of Jesus’ words and deeds. The work of the imagination translates Jesus’ words and deeds for our time. We put ourselves in Jesus’ shoes, in the shoes of the disciples, the keystone kops of the gospels, and in the shoes of the other characters in the scriptures. We need hearts open to the presence of the Holy Spirit, and we need community in which to ask the question. One of the most important parts of Maxwell’s charge to the congregation was the weekly meeting over the course of the year. As Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them”, (Matthew 18:20)

### Conclusion

I love how E. Stanley Jones, the great Methodist missionary/theologian, describes the decision to follow Jesus: *To give as much of yourself as you can to*

*as much of Christ as you know.* I love the dynamism of it, the adventure of it, as every day we are discovering more and more of ourselves we can give and more and more of Christ we can give ourselves to. And all of it leads to greater love of God and greater love of our neighbor. Thomas A Kempis called it developing “a familiar friendship” with Jesus. Maybe being a Christian is being a friend of Jesus. About the time Charles Sheldon wrote *In His Steps*, a Social Gospel pastor/theologian, Washington Gladden wrote a famous hymn with these words:

O Master, let me walk with thee,  
In lowly paths of service free;  
tell me thy secret; help me bear  
the strain of toil, the fret of care.

O, Master, let us at Grace Baptist walk with thee.