

Following Jesus, Today!

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It seems harder and harder to define what a Christian is today, especially as it pertains to belonging to the institutional church. Someone described what sometimes is true: What begins as a movement becomes an institution and then becomes a racket. There's some of that going on in the name of Christ today.

I've heard, then, some say: "I don't call myself a Christian; I call myself a follower of Jesus." That's getting closer to it.

A few years back Bill Moyers invited Wendell Berry to be interviewed on his Moyers And Company, T.V. program. Berry, as you know, is the Kentucky writer and farmer I admire. Both Berry and Moyers grew up in Baptist churches. At one point in the interview Moyers asked Berry if he still considered himself a Christian. Berry replied,

I still consider myself a person who takes the gospels very seriously. And I read in them and am sometimes shamed by them and sometimes utterly baffled by them. But there is a good bit of the gospel I do get.... And I'm sticking to that. And I'm hanging on for the parts that I don't understand.

And, you know, willing to endure the shame of falling short in the following of him as a price of admission.

I like that a lot. I think I can call myself a follower of Jesus and am willing to bear the shame of falling short in the following of him as a price of admission.

I

When I was about nine years old I walked down the aisle of Ardmore Baptist Church in Winston Salem, where my father was minister of music, and announced my desire to be baptized as a follower of Jesus. When the day of baptism came I remember that as I went under the water and up out of the water, I felt as though some grand new adventure had begun. A brand-new life, though I had lived very little of the old one. In those days Southern Baptists wanted children to be baptized *young*, before adolescence hit and the hormones kicked in, when *real* sinning could happen.

Who was this Jesus I decided that day to follow? I could have no idea where it would take me. A few years ago I received a note from a woman in Greensboro who now ran a community ministry agency. She said, "I was baptized the same night you were at Ardmore Baptist. We didn't have a clue what we were doing, did we?" I think I had some clue, but this following of Jesus is a road that cannot be plotted out at the beginning, and we cannot predict where it will take us.

II

“Follow me”, were Jesus’ first words to those he first called to be disciples, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. They were working class fishermen.

“Follow me”, Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers for people”. And “immediately” the text says, “they left their nets and followed him.”

Then Jesus saw James and John, the sons of Zebedee, also fishermen, mending their nets in their boat and issued the same call, “Follow me.” And “immediately” the text says, “they left their boat and their father.” You wonder what in the world their father thought!

What did Jesus mean when he said he’d make them “fishers for people?” In Hebrew scriptures, (see Jeremiah 16) the image of catching people was an image of judgment. The wicked are being caught in nets for destruction. Jesus reverses the image: Jesus’ fishers are rescuers, saving people, catching them in nets as they are about to perish in the sea. Disciples are deliverers. As the old gospel hymn goes:

Rescue the perishing, care for the dying

Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save.

There are all kinds of ways to be overtaken by the swirling waves of life, all kinds of perishing, all kinds of dying. And Jesus calls us to brave the waves to rescue people in the flood.

III

In Jesus' earthly ministry there were all kinds of disciples and many ways of following him. Some left their homes, families and jobs and followed him on the road. These were the Twelve. And there were women in this circle too, following him and supporting him out of their means. Luke mentions three: Mary Magdalene, from whom seven demons had been cast; Joanna, wife of Chusa, Herod's steward (that must have been an interesting story!); and Suzanna (Luke 8:1-3).

There were others we could call "residential members" of the Jesus movement, those who stayed home and helped Jesus from there. Mary, Martha and Lazarus of Bethany are prime examples. And then there were others, like Nicodemus, who took time before he committed to follow. (Not all followed "immediately".)

Disciple in Greek means "learner." But it was more than a theoretical or academic learning, that is, an exchange of information. It required the engagement of the whole self, body, mind and spirit. Dallas Willard, in his

wonderful work, *The Divine Conspiracy*, says that a better word for disciple is “apprentice” And an apprentice, he writes,

...is someone who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions in order to become capable of doing what that person does, or to become what that person is. ²

I like the image of disciple as apprentice. It reminds me who the Master is (Not I!). It implies that there will be successes and failures along the way of learning. It suggests that it will take some time. It implies a deep willingness to be with Jesus as we learn of him, to develop what Thomas a Kempis in his spiritual classic, *Of the Imitation of Christ* called “a familiar friendship with Jesus”. ³

It is being with Jesus over a substantial period of time. There are no crash courses on being a disciple, no “Forty Days To Become a Christian” manuals. We are in such a hurry most of the time for everything. But this takes time, and no one’s time table is the same. Maya Angelou wrote that when someone comes to her and announces, “I’m a Christian!” she replies “Already?!”

There is a Zen Buddhist story about an eager young man who came to the Zen master and said,

I’m ready for enlightenment! If I become your disciple, how long will it take to achieve it?

The old master shrugged and said, “Ten years, give or take.” The young man answered,

That’s way too long! I need to move faster than that! What if I work extra hard to subdue the ego and let go of attachments and learn all the spiritual exercises? How long will it take me?

The Zen master smiled and said, “In that case we’re looking at twenty, maybe thirty years.”

We need to allow time, and we need to allow *God*, that is God, to do God’s holy work. This is not an Olympic sport; it is a journey. And we cannot do it on our own.

IV

Dallas Willard wrote of the “appropriate conditions” necessary to become an apprentice of Jesus. What are they? I would start here: *Dwelling in the words of Jesus and letting Jesus’ words dwell in you*. Hearing his words and letting them dwell in you is so important as we are being formed as followers. That is why we are here today and every Sunday.

The other condition is: *Belonging to a community of faith where a long conversation with Jesus has been going on*. There, people have over a long

period of time have been hearing Jesus' words and helping each other interpret them and live them out.

Is there a book we must master before we set out, some rules we have to follow. When Sue and I talked about the sermon she said, It's not about "abiding *by*" some set of rules; it's about "abiding *with*", that is with Jesus, as we set out on the road together. It is about relationship.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer the brilliant young theologian who was martyred and executed by Hitler for opposing him wrote an important book named *The Cost of Discipleship*. He said:

When Jesus calls, it is, "Follow me, run along behind". That is all⁴

V

These are beginning points to becoming a follower of Jesus, but there are also other beginning points where it is almost like starting over again. The disciples in the gospels are like Keystone Kops, stumbling along one minute "getting it", the other minute clueless, one minute courageous and the next minute the Cowardly Lion. But they don't give up because Jesus doesn't give up on them, on us. Some days we are like the clown car at the circus, but Jesus keeps sending us out.

Jurgen Moltmann, one of the great theologians of our era, became a follower of Jesus as a German prisoner of war in a Scottish prisoner of war camp. He had been conscripted into Hitler's army. There the Scottish chaplain gave him a little New Testament with Psalms. He came to my church in Louisville to preach, and before he preached he told the story, held up the tattered New Testament with Psalms and read the Psalm which was so important to him then, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." His journey with Jesus began in that prison with that New Testament. In his autobiography he wrote:

I never decided for Christ once and for all, as is often demanded of us. I have decided again and again in specific terms for the discipleship of Christ when situations were serious and it was necessary. But I am certain that there, in 1945, and there in the Scottish prisoner of war camp in the dark pit of my soul, Jesus sought and found me.⁵

I think there is for us all some beginning point even if we cannot pinpoint the moment. But we must decide every day, over and over again to follow Jesus as life presents the choice to us.

There was such a moment for me when I was a pastor in Ft. Worth. I'm not sure if I've told this story in a sermon. A black pastor friend, Michael Bell, had begun a protest outside an almost all white elementary school to protest the de-facto segregation of Ft. Worth public schools along racial lines.

The school was right down the street from where I lived. The protest had gone on for several weeks with 30 or so black community leaders outside the school entrance every morning as school began. As you might imagine, many people in the community were upset.

One morning just before I awakened I heard a voice in a dream. The voice said, "Go join Michael". Was it God's voice, the voice of my conscience, what I ate the night before? Who can know? So I got up, put my clothes on and drove down and joined them. When Michael saw me coming, he said to me with surprise: "Steve, what are you doing here?" I replied, "A dream sent me. I'll explain later."

Later in the afternoon I got a call from a close friend in the church who was also Assistant Superintendent of the school district. The police had written down my license plate number, found out who I was, and reported it to him. Joe said, "Steve, what were you doing down there?" "A dream", I said, and we talked. He was a kindred spirit who championed under-served students, but was surprised I was there.

I look back now and say: "I up and decided again to follow Jesus." I do not tell this this story to make myself a hero of my own story. How many times have I not been open to hearing such a voice. How many times have I heard but been too cowardly to act. Many.

VI

The famous Missionary/Theologian E. Stanley Jones described our first turning to Jesus to follow him: *We give as much of ourselves as we can to as much of Christ as we know*. Then the marvelous daily adventure begins: We become able to give more and more of ourselves to Christ, and we discover more and more of Christ to give ourselves to.

That's *my* story. It's an ongoing story. And I, as the saying goes, am sticking to it—wherever it leads!

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1. Moyers & Company, October 4, 2013
 2. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (N.Y.: Harper San Francisco, 1998), p. 282.
 3. Thomas A'Kempis, *Of the Imitation of Christ*, second book, chapter 8.
 4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (N.Y.: The MacMillan Co., 1963), p.49.
 5. Jurgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place* (Minneapolis, Minn., 2008), p.3.