

Following Jesus?

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14:51

Margaret Mead, the cultural anthropologist once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has." This quote came to my mind as I was delving into the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark. We sometimes think of Jesus' life and ministry in such lofty terms, but it's good to remember how it actually began. It's good to come back to earth.

Jesus began his ministry with four disciples: Simon (Peter), Andrew, James, and John. In time, they would be joined by eight more and would gather more followers as they traveled from town to town, preaching the Good News. In time, their Movement would change their religious landscape, question their culture, and speak truth to power. But the Jesus Movement had humble beginnings—just Jesus himself on the shore of the Sea of Galilee calling out to fishermen in a boat.

For the third week in a row, this morning's scripture is about a call story. We had Jesus begin his ministry and receive his calling at his baptism. Last week, we heard about young Samuel in the Temple hearing the voice of God. This week, we're exploring Jesus calling the first disciples. But this text is so much more than an isolated incident in history; it should cause us to pause today: What if you saw Jesus on the shore calling out to you to follow him? Would you immediately leave your stuff, your family, and your old life behind to follow him? That's a hard expectation for Jesus to have of us: we're important people, we have responsibilities, people who depend on us, jobs, houses, school or projects to finish, one more trip to Aruba—we can't just go traipsing around with Jesus fishing for people.

Once Christianity got institutionalized, once we become a major world religion, and got some power—we lost a bit of this urgency Mark speaks to. We've probably gotten too comfortable worshiping Christ and less concerned with following Jesus when he calls out to us, less concerned about doing the things he taught us to do.

Robin Meyers, a UCC minister in Oklahoma, wrote a book called *Saving Jesus From the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus*. He laments, "Arguing over the metaphysics of Christ only divides us. But agreeing to follow the essential teaching of Jesus could unite us. We could become imitators, not believers."^[1] By this, he means that as Christians we should be less concerned with right belief and more concerned with right action, right living.

In fact, Jesus' early disciples called the Jesus Movement, before his teachings were codified and Christianity became a separate religion, simply "The Way."^[2] Because that's what it all meant—what Jesus preached and taught was a way of life, a way of being, a way of relating to God, the world, and one another.

But let's talk about his teaching for a second—the most important teaching Jesus ever taught, if we had to sum up Christianity in one episode, it's when Jesus tells his followers what the greatest commandments are. It shouldn't be John 3:16, the one verse you see all over signs at sporting events and the verse touted by some Christians as the most important verse in the Bible—"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."^[3] I was forced to memorize this verse when I went to a conservative Bible camp with a friend in fourth grade, learning by heart the King James Version, of course.

And John 3:16 isn't bad, but it's just so passive on our part. God loves the world, that's fantastic and comforting, but what can we do to show God's love to others? How can we use this belief to make us better people, better Christians?

The attitude I hear with this verse is usually, God loves us and God sent us Jesus to save us, and if you believe in him, you'll be saved too! So do you believe in him? Even if you say, "Yes, I do believe in Jesus." Well then what? What do you do with this belief, how does it affect your life and the way you treat other people. That's why Marcus Borg says that a better way to use this verse and a more accurate translation is not believing in Jesus as in believing in certain theological claims about him, but "beloving Jesus, giving one's heart, loyalty, fidelity, and commitment to Jesus. This is the way into new life." [4]

This same sentiment is echoed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Christian pastor, theologian and martyr who was executed after a failed attempt to assassinate Hitler in 1943. Bonhoeffer said, "Sometimes we don't need another chance to express how we feel or to ask someone to understand our situation. Sometimes we just need a firm kick in the pants. An unsmiling expectation that if we mean all these wonderful things we talk about and sing about, then let's see something to prove it." Pretty powerful words from a person who lived out his beliefs, putting himself in harm's way and eventually dying in order to try to save the soul of Germany.

What Bonhoeffer and Borg and Myers are getting at is that actions matter. Really, the most important words of Jesus to live by can be found in his response to a question, an episode depicted in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" And Jesus said, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" [5]

This is what we are called to do. When we, like the disciples, go out and fish for people, this is what it's all about. That's why Meyers says that his UCC church in Oklahoma is "doing our best to avoid the worship of Christ and get back to something much more fulfilling and transformative: following Jesus . . . We are looking for a teacher, not a savior." [6]

None of us will be perfect at following the way of Jesus, living out his teachings. But I think it's worth a try. After all, our words can ring hollow after awhile when people supposedly believe the right things and yet those beliefs don't cause them to live a Christian life, to love God and neighbors, to care for, feed, and clothe people as if we are caring for, feeding, and clothing Jesus himself. These teachings of Jesus are supposed to affect you and change your life if you only let them.

One of the best examples of this comes from the theological world of the 20th Century. Albert Schweitzer, who won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 for his philosophical beliefs, was a Lutheran theologian, pastor, accomplished organist, and eventually a doctor who founded a hospital in Africa in 1913. Schweitzer was a famous scholar. His book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, sparked some controversy in his day because some of the arguments he makes are a little out there. But Schweitzer's life is what makes him so noteworthy. He gave up his fame in Germany to travel to Africa as a medical missionary. Schweitzer went back to school and became a doctor, eventually using the money from his scholarly career to found a hospital. [7]

As Meyers says, "It is ironic that none of those who took issue with Schweitzer's theology and cursed his writings gave up fame and fortune or membership in the highest stratum of German society to live among the poorest of the poor. . . Theologians who sat in endowed chairs took his Christology to task, while he scraped infectious legions off . . . natives in the steaming misery of equatorial Africa." [8] It's easy to criticize somebody from a lofty place while they are

down in the trenches, trying to improve the lives of God's people and live out the faith they proclaim.

In the end of Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* he interprets this morning's Gospel lesson, the call of the disciples. In fact, some have even said that it's this morning's passage of Jesus calling his disciples by the shore of the sea that compelled Schweitzer to work in Africa. Schweitzer said, "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the task which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is." [9]

What Schweitzer says is that Jesus is not revealed to us through correct beliefs about him. Jesus is revealed to us when we follow his ways, when we follow "The Way." Jesus is revealed to us when we answer his call, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." [10]

Not all of us are going to found hospitals in foreign countries to live out the teachings of Jesus like Albert Schweitzer or stand up to the Nazis like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and I don't think we have to. There are small things we can do to show that we are followers of Jesus helping him to fish for people, doing our best every day to live out his teachings—loving God with our entire beings and loving our neighbors as ourselves. The question is, what does this look like for you? Amen.

[1] Robin R Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus*, 10.

[2] Robin R Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, 10.

[3] John 3:16

[4] Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost their Meaning and Power—And How They Can Be Restored*, 163.

[5] Matthew 22: 36-40

[6] Robin R Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, 6, 7.

[7] http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1952/schweitzer-bio.html

[8] Robin R Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, 17.

[9] Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, as quoted by Robin R Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, 16-17.

[10] Mark 1:17