



Being A Follower of Jesus Today – June 30, 2019

Given by Rev. Schroeder

St. Luke 9:57-62

It's a strange and even a shocking thing Jesus does here, it seems to me. Think of it: he's in the midst of his career, and one of his important tasks is gathering followers, disciples. Well, here come three who offer to be his disciples, and they seem sincere: I will follow you wherever you go, says one of them. But in the end Jesus dismisses them with what seems like a brush-off – all three. One can only guess at what St. Luke is trying to tell us here (St. Matthew 8:18-22, tells the story of two of the three) – perhaps that Jesus was no pushover, that he was looking for tough-minded and tough-skinned people to join him in his cause. Two of the three, you notice, had something they had to do first: one wanted to bury his father, and the other wanted to say goodbye to his family. Those sound like reasonable requests, and in our first lesson today (1 Kings 19:20f) one of them gets a positive response. But maybe the picture St. Luke wants to draw for us here is of three people who think it would be fine to follow Jesus, to tag along and hang out with him for a time, but who aren't about to give it top priority or let it rearrange their schedules any. Maybe their interest in Jesus was superficial, like those hard rocks in the parable of the sower, representing those who heard the message gladly but didn't let it sink in deep and who lost their interest when something better came along (Luke 8:13). However you try to explain them, the stories remain rather puzzling.

And it's puzzling, for much the same reason, for us to read them in church today. I suppose you have heard that membership in the church is on the decline these days. It's nothing drastic, and the history of the church for 2,000 years now includes set-backs as well as gains. The growth line doesn't go straight up but looks rather jagged, even though today Christians number about one out of three persons alive, about 2 billion. But the church today is not in the business of turning away followers, as Jesus seems to do here. In fact, it's pretty easy to become a member of the church today. Let me tell you how easy it is...and Nativity isn't much different from most other churches.

You can just call the church office to let them know you're interested, or, even simpler, check the line on the information card that says "wish information about membership" or "wish pastor to call." That will likely lead to a meeting or series of meetings with ten or fifteen others, including some current members who might serve as sponsors of the new members. At these meetings you'll hear all about the church, what it stands for and what it does, and you'll have a chance to ask your questions. Then on a future Sunday you come either to be baptized or to make confirmation of your earlier baptism. You confess the creed and promise to do five important things: to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people after the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

It's really pretty simple, and our hope is that this will lead you to become an active member of the church and a lively follower of Jesus day by day, week by week, and year by year, for a lifetime. It isn't rigorous. You don't have to pass an elaborate test, and you aren't likely to be turned down or turned away. The hope is that you will find the church offering you an open door and a warm welcome. That's what I miss in the stories of these three would-be followers of Jesus in our lesson for today: the open door and the warm welcome.

The larger question for us, of course, is what does it mean/take to be a follower of Jesus today. A church in Virginia that we used to visit sometimes when visiting family there would list every Sunday in its bulletin, just so you wouldn't forget, seven marks of discipleship. See what you think of them, see how well these seven marks describe you if you happen to be a church member:

1. pray daily
2. worship weekly
3. read the Bible
4. grow spiritually
5. serve at and beyond the congregation
6. build caring relationships
7. give of your time, talents, and resources.

I like those pretty well – do you? They are another way of saying those five promises I mentioned just a moment ago.

Perhaps this is a good Sunday for all of us who are baptized and who have made affirmation of our baptism, for all of us who are members of the church, to ask ourselves how well we are doing as followers of Jesus today, to see if we measure up, to see if there are ways we're missing the boat, so to speak, and to make up our minds to get with it. One of my favorite writers says being a follower of Jesus today embraces two things, a growing conviction and a growing passion (Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, pp. xi-xii).

The growing conviction is that Jesus is the way and the truth about our life (John 14:6a), that Jesus makes persuasive and compelling sense of our life. If we think of Jesus only or primarily as the way to heaven, it's urgent for us to discover Jesus as the way to true life and living here and now. That's what's behind the bumper-sticker that asks, What Would Jesus Do? (WWJD) To be a follower of Jesus is to want to do the will of God, what Jesus wants us to do, to get beyond our self-centeredness and our money-centeredness, our laziness and apathy, and our persistent anxiety about ourselves...to get beyond all that and to enter into his life and his love for the world and all the people of the world...and no one shows us the way to do that better than Jesus.

The growing conviction I'm speaking of is that Christianity makes sense and meaning of our lives, that there are no serious intellectual obstacles to being a Christian. You don't *really* have to choose between Genesis and Darwin. You don't really have to believe six impossible things each day, as Lewis Carroll wonders in his fairy tale (*Through A Looking Glass*). You don't have to rewrite the history books Texas-style. The Christian Church and Nativity Church live by this simple but basic growing conviction: that Jesus is the way and the truth about our life.

And with that growing conviction comes a growing passion. You grow to love God, passionately, with all your heart and soul and mind and strength (Luke 10:27). Who is this One you grow to love passionately? It is your creator, your helper, your lover, your savior, your everlasting God, and to love him means to *pay attention* to him and to what he loves. You don't just say you believe in God and walk away, but you learn to love God, to love what God loves and to be passionate about what God is passionate about. In the Creed, you remember, we say, "I believe in God." Those words originally meant "I believe God." Try substituting that and see what happens when you recite the Creed: not just "I believe in God" but "I believe God," not just "I believe in Jesus Christ" but "I believe Jesus Christ," not just "I believe in the Holy Spirit" but "I believe the Holy Spirit," not just "I believe in the church" but "I believe the church."

Jesus was a passionate human being. We say all sorts of elaborate things about Jesus: he was born of the Virgin Mary, he is the Son of God, he sits at the right hand of the Father. But all that means nothing if we do not share his passion for God and for the things of God, his passion for life and for this rich and wonderful world, his passion for people who are hurting in this rich and wonderful world, his passion for peace and for justice for *all* people and not just those who see things our way. To be a follower of Jesus doesn't mean making enemies of Buddhists and Muslims and people of other cultures and religions. It means rather to respect people in their differences and not to think you have to convert them, maybe even forcibly, to your mindset and your lifestyle. It's not for nothing that in the Bible Jesus is called the bringer of justice (Matthew 12:17-21) and the prince of peace (Isaiah 9:6, Luke 1:79, 2:14, John 14:27). Jesus was clearly a passionate human being – the church and the Bible are quite clear about that. I recall how a popular singer of the '60s (Donovan) said it once: "Jesus was beautiful, and we were taught funny about him; I like to remember him with the children."

So – a growing conviction (Jesus is the way and the truth about our life) and a growing passion (we share in Jesus' passion for God, and for the things that God is passionate about). That's what it means/takes to be a follower of Jesus today.

Martin Marty once asked people who consider themselves followers of Jesus to consider whether they have ever let their faith interrupt a single cultural pattern (such as going to war or how to treat immigrants or the pursuit of wealth), whether they ever, in the face of a schedule conflict, place discipleship ahead of their household gods (*Hidden Discipline*, pp. 3-4). This is a good day for us to ask ourselves questions like these about our discipleship.

So, being a follower of Jesus today – we have our work cut out for us, don't we?

Pastor Phil Schroeder
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Nativity Lutheran Church – Weeki Wachee, FL