

“Discipleship in Mark’s Gospel: Following Jesus”

a sermon by

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Text: “And immediately they left their nets and followed him” (Mark 1:18).

This sermon began innocently enough several years ago. I was spending the week at Princeton Seminary and during the course of that week had lunch with the President of the Seminary, who at that time was Dr. Thomas Gillespie. After lunch we wandered to the bookstore. As I was looking around, Dr. Gillespie handed me a book and said he thought I might find it interesting. The name of the book was *Christology at the Crossroads*. It was written by a Jesuit priest in El Salvador by the name of Jan Sabrino. In this book Sabrino raises an important question: Are we following Jesus or believing in Christ?

Sabrino makes the point that most of our emphasis in the church has been on believing in Christ. Many of the great Councils at Niceae and Chalcedon focused on important questions, such as the relationship between God and Christ and the question of whether Jesus was both “fully God” and “fully man.”

Now, these are crucial questions and they are particularly critical in a time when the uniqueness of Jesus is being challenged both inside and outside the church. But Sabrino makes the point that it is possible to believe in Christ--that is to believe all the right things about Christ and never be confronted with the question of what it means to “follow Jesus.”

I.

In Mark’s gospel the author begins the ministry of Jesus with the calling of four disciples. In Mark’s gospel there are no stories that tell of the birth of Jesus, no stories that tell of his childhood. Mark begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, and the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.

According to Mark’s gospel the ministry of Jesus begins when passing by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, and then the sons of Zebedee, James and John. All four of these men are fishermen and in each of the “call stories” the movement is the same. Jesus encounters these men. He calls to them, “Follow Me.” On both occasions we read, “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

This morning marks the first Sunday in the Season of Lent. Over the next five weeks we will look again at “Discipleship in Mark’s Gospel.” This morning we begin with the challenge of following Jesus.

II.

Following Jesus means, first of all, that our lives must be lived in conformity to his life. John Calvin in his Institutes of the Christian Religion defined the Christian life in terms of “denying oneself, taking up the cross, and following Jesus.” E.M. Forster in his book, *Passage to India*, describes the bumbling way that the British tried to rule India. In one passage he speaks of a particular British commander by the name of Ronnie who was sent to rule the maharajahs. “Ronnie,” he writes, “approved of religion as long as it endorsed the national anthem but he objected when it attempted to influence his life.”

That is the point that Sabrino attempts to make in his book. Believing in Christ does not necessarily make any demands on a person. I can believe that Jesus is the Son of God. I can affirm with the Nicene Creed that Jesus is “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten not made.” And all of that is important. But believing in Christ is not the same thing as following Jesus. Believing in Christ is about giving mental assent to the church’s propositions about Christ. But following Jesus is something radically different. Following Jesus has to do with a person’s life style, values, priorities and surrender.

Several years ago I came across a remarkable biography *The Life of Sir Thomas More*, written by Peter Ackroyd. Thomas More was the only person in the history of England who was a royal knight, a saint of the church, and a martyr. Thomas More's life was commemorated some years ago by a play and movie, entitled "A Man for All Seasons." Robert Bork recently observed that Thomas More was not only a "man for all seasons" but particularly a "man for this season" for More represents something that is an enigma for us--a person willing to die for something in which he believes.

Thomas More was one of the most respected men in all of England. He was not only one of King Henry VIII's closest friends and confidants; he was also the Lord Chancellor of England. But something happened that changed Thomas More. Henry VIII divorced his wife, Katherine, and married Anne Boelyn. Every person in the realm was required to take an oath in support of the King's action. But Thomas More could not take that oath. The King urged him to take the oath, but More refused. His own family begged with him to take the oath. "After all," his wife argued, "the King is going to marry Anne Boelyn. What difference, 'she plead,' does it make whether you approve it or not." But Thomas More had something that is in short supply today. He had a sense of conscience. He could not take the oath.

Finally, he was tried for treason and sentenced to death by beheading. As he walked to the platform where the executioner stood, he said to those present, "I die the King's good servant, but God's servant first."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once observed that "when Christ calls a person, he calls that person to die." There is a lot of talk in the church today about "believing in Christ." But how often do we talk about following Jesus. In all my years in the church I don't ever remember anyone asking me if I was willing to "follow Jesus"--not when I was confirmed as a child in the church, not when I was ordained as a minister. To be sure, there were a lot of people who wanted to know what I believed about Christ. They wanted to know if I believed in the Virgin Birth or if I held the "substitutionary view of the Atonement." But no one ever asked me, "Bill Wood, are you willing to follow Jesus."

III.

Then, too, following Jesus means not only that our lives must in some way conform to the life of Christ; it means also that like Jesus we are called to live in dependence on God. John Leith in his book *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, once observed that the converse of being dependent on God is to be independent of everything that is not God.

That is one of the things that Mark's gospel makes very clear about Jesus. He was not beholden to Herod, to the Scribes and Pharisees or any other group. "Foxes have dens," he observed, "the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head." That was one of the appealing and disturbing aspects of Jesus. He never seemed to have any need to acquire things. He lived with a remarkable amount of freedom.

Some years ago a singer by the name of Roberta Flack recorded a song, entitled “Let Pharaoh Go.” When I first heard it, I thought to myself, that wasn’t the problem. The problem that the Jews had in Egypt was getting Pharaoh to allow them leave. That was the whole nature of Moses’ struggle with the King of Egypt. The King would not let the Israelites leave bondage and return to the Promised Land. But the more I thought about, the more the song seemed to hit home. The Israelites had a terrible time letting Pharaoh go. After they had fled Egypt and crossed the Red Sea they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. During this time they rebelled against Moses and Aaron. They could not deal with freedom. They were hungry and thirsty. They longed for the “fleshpots” of Egypt. They taunted Moses with the question of why he had led them out of Egypt only to die in the desert. The great problem in the wilderness was that they could not let Pharaoh go.

It’s hard to let Pharaoh go, isn’t it? It’s hard to give up one’s security, one’s own bed, and one’s own comfort system.

Sometimes--particularly in the season of Lent, I am haunted with the question of whether I am just believing in Christ or whether I am following Jesus? If I am following Jesus, then why am I such a good insurance risk? If I am following Jesus, then when I have done my giving to church, why do I have so much left over? If I am following Jesus, why do my closets bulge when so many are unclothed? If I am following Jesus, why am I tempted to overeat in a world in which most of the children of the world go to bed hungry? If I am following Jesus, why am I getting along so well in a world that marked him early out for death?

Somehow I get the feeling today that we are missing the point. We talk a lot today in the church about “orthodoxy,” that is in the “right beliefs.” But there is also something called “orthopraxy,” which means having the right actions.

We are living today in a “celebrity” culture, where most of us are drawn to those individuals who we see on television or in movies. The same is true about religious leaders. Often we think of those who we are most often to see on the cover of books, or television, or read about in the paper.

If I were asked to name the most influential Christians of the past century, I would probably name Albert Schweitzer, Mother Theresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Toyohiko Kagawa. Most people today do not know the name of Kagawa. He was born to wealth and, as a young man, attended Princeton Seminary. In his later years he forswore his wealth and lived in the slums of Tokyo, where he contracted tuberculosis. In the years after World War II he became one of the most important people in Japan, helping the nation recover from the ravages of the war.

Toward the end of his life he was invited back to Princeton Seminary to give an address. He spoke for about forty-five minutes. At the end of his address, as a group of students were leaving Miller Chapel, one of the students turned to another student and said, “Well, he didn’t

have much to say, did he?" An older woman, who overheard the comment, turned to the student and said, "A man on a cross doesn't have to say anything."

So on this first Sunday of Lent I want to ask this question of each one of us: "Are we following Jesus or just believing in Christ?" "It's an unfair question," you might reply. "It's a false division."

But if we are going to err, let's err on the side of following, because one can believe without following, but it is not possible to follow without believing.

Amen!