

“Following Jesus”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

February 21, 2010

**Text: “He called to the crowd with his disciples and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me.’”
(Mark 8:34)**

Several months ago someone sent to me an article in the *Presbyterian Outlook* by Chris Currie, who is the minister of Calypso Presbyterian Church in Calypso, North Carolina. In this article he points to a pattern that is often present in worship services when a minister is ordained/installed as a minister or an associate minister. One of the elements of the service of ordination/ installation is the “charge to the minister.” As Currie notes, usually that charge to the minister is laced with admonitions about clergy self care. One minister usually stands up and tells another minister to resist the temptation to work oneself to death, to be sure to take a day or two off, to set boundaries and not try to be all things to all people.

Though it often comes as a surprise to members of a church, each ministerial candidate in the Presbyterian Church is at one time or another, required to undergo a batter of psychological tests (some of us actually passed them!) before he or she can be certified for ordination. Clergy health, stability, and self care are obviously at the forefront of our collective minds as ministers.

Now, certainly I do not want to advocate an unhealthy lifestyle. Ministers, like everyone else, strive for balance between personal and profession life, devotion to one’s calling as well as family and life-style decisions that promote spiritual, physical, and emotional health.

But, I admit to you that I sometimes worry if our current therapeutic pursuits do not contradict, or at least run into, the strong headwinds of God.

I.

This morning begins the first Sunday in Lent, a time in which the church has traditionally examined again the life of Christ and asked again concerning the cost of discipleship.

Over the next five Sundays we will look at the Gospel of Mark, as we explore the ways that we are called to follow Jesus.

The Gospel of Mark is one of the three so called “Synoptic Gospels.” Mark, Matthew, and Luke bear this title. They tend to view the life of Christ in a very similar way. The fourth gospel, the Gospel of John, views the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus from a very different perspective and is often viewed apart from these other three gospels.

The gospel of Mark is generally viewed as the oldest of the four gospels. It is generally believed to have been written before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

It is also clear that Mark’s gospel was known by both the author of the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. Mark’s gospel contains 666 verses. Of these, 660 are found in almost identical form in Matthew and Luke.

There is a long-standing tradition in the church that the author of Mark had a firsthand acquaintance with the disciple Peter and that Mark’s remembrances go directly to the ministry of Jesus, though the Gospel was written four decades after the death of Christ.

There is also another dimension to Mark’s gospel. Most New Testament scholars believe that Mark’s gospel is written to the church at Rome that was facing a dire persecution under the threat of the Emperor Nero. Christians were being called before Roman Councils. Some were being burned at the stake. Others were fed to wild animals in the arena or killed by gladiators during the Roman games.

For these reasons, there is a sense of urgency in Mark’s gospel. Mark understands that following Jesus Christ has become a challenge.

The passage from which I have read today is a watershed passage. It separates the early ministry of Jesus in Galilee from the later days when Jesus faced toward Jerusalem and the inevitable conflict there. At Caesarea Philippi the disciples are asked to answer Jesus’ question about his identity. At Caesarea Philippi they are for the first time confronted with the challenge of following him. At Caesarea Philippi we hear the call of Jesus most clearly: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34)

II.

So let’s be clear. Following Jesus is about sacrifice. It makes demands on us. It is not a matter of convenience, entertainment, or even picking and choosing the things we like or don’t like about a particular church. It is about following Jesus.

Recently I came across an article in *First Things* by a woman named Mary Eberstadt in which she attacks what she calls “Christianity Lite.” In her article she quotes a famous church historian named Kenneth Latourette who raised the question as how such a small and obscure sect of Judaism became in five centuries the faith of the Roman Empire and had spread as far as Central Asia, India, and westward to Ireland.

Latourette then goes on to cite Christianity's surprisingly strong combination of flexibility and inclusivity on the one hand, and uncompromising adherence to its basic convictions on the other. In striking contrast to the easy going syncretism of the time, Christianity was adamant on what it regarded as basic principles.

And right from the beginning, those principles were understood to include matters of sexual morality. The pagans, the early Christians were instructed, could have it all: their idols, their infanticide, their contraception, their abortion; the Christians couldn't. The Jews could have their divorce; the Christians could not.

Now, let's don't kid ourselves. Many of these things put people off then, as they do today. But many people were attracted to Christianity because it stood for something. It was more than a pale reflection of culture.

It is hard for me to look around today without the strange notion that somehow something has gone wrong. We have turned worship into entertainment, belonging to a church into a matter of convenience, and the notion of following Jesus seems almost foreign to those of us in a consumer society.

That is why during this Lenten Season, I am asking that you join me for these five weeks to look again at the Gospel of Mark.

Sometimes I think we are so familiar with the words of the New Testament that they fall off of us like water off the back of duck. But surely there is more to the New Testament than offering people a life of complete emotional health, balance, and self care. Listen to the words of Jesus:

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brother and sister, and even life itself cannot be my disciple.

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple
(Luke 14:26-27).

Is life in Flossenburg prison or in the Birmingham jail or on the streets of Calcutta really the most stress-free life one can imagine?

III.

Following Jesus is not only about sacrifice. It is also about conforming our lives to his life. Some years ago I came across a book by Jan Sobrino, a Roman Catholic Priest in El Salvador entitled *Christology at the Crossroads*. In that book he made a point that has haunted me ever since. Sobrino argues that Christianity in the West has largely focused on what we believe about Christ. The great Councils of the Church at Nicaea and Chalcedon focused on the important questions about the relationship between God and Jesus and the question of the degree to which Jesus was “fully God” and “fully man.”

But Sobrino makes an important point when he says that you can believe all the right things about Jesus and still not follow him. Because following Jesus is not just about having the right doctrine. Believing in Christ is about given mental assent to the church's propositions about Christ.

But following Jesus has to do with a person's life style, values, priorities and surrender. It has to do with how we spend our money and our time.

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. They wanted to know if I held the "substitutionary view of the Atonement." But no one ever asked me, "Bill Wood, are you willing to follow Jesus?"

IV.

Then, too, following Jesus not only means a call to sacrifice as well as to conform our lives to the life of Christ, it also means 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," Jesus said, "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 let them go. The was the whole nature of Moses' struggle with the King of Egypt. The king would not let the Israelites leave their 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 of the wilderness was 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 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, why am I such a good insurance risk? If I am following Jesus, then when I have finished my giving to the 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 that we are missing the point in the church. We talk a lot in the church about “orthodoxy” – that is, in having the right beliefs. But there is also something called “orthopraxy,” which means having the right actions.

When I was at Princeton Seminary a few months ago, I came across an exhibit in the Luce Library marking the 200th Anniversary of the missionaries who went from this country to China. Many of these missionaries faced great difficulties and some paid with their lives. One of the earliest missionaries was a twenty-six year old young man named Walter Macon Lowrie. He was from a very distinguished family. In fact his father was a United States Senator. He was captured by pirates and thrown overboard in the China Sea where he drowned.

Walter Lowrie didn’t make the cover of *Time Magazine*. He never had a book on the best seller list. He never appeared on Oprah or on any of the late night television shows, yet he gave his life to the cause of Christ.

So on this first Sunday in the Lenten Season I want to ask the question: “Are we following Jesus or just believing in Christ?” “It’s an unfair question,” you might reply, “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 I do not think it is possible to follow without believing.

Amen.