

“To Be Or Not To Be...A Follower”

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Text: Luke 4: 14 – 30, 6: 12-19

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When we recall Jesus choosing the twelve apostles, I think our first notion is that the apostles quickly and excitedly said “yes”. Sort of like picking teams for school yard baseball. All the players are lined up, all hoping that the team captain will pick them first! Recall the story of the fishermen on the beach. Jesus simply said “follow me”, and the fishermen dropped their nets and followed. But was the decision really that easy? The two stories we read this morning could not be more different, and they show right from the beginning that Jesus was a polarizing figure! In the one story, Jesus attended worship in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. After reading this passage from Isaiah he told his listeners, “This passage is being fulfilled today even as you listen.” Dramatic, surprising words, given what the passage says. I will read it again with emphasis. “The spirit of the Lord has been given to ME, for the spirit has anointed ME. It has sent ME to bring good news to the poor...” In other words, Jesus was saying ‘I am the one God is using to fulfill this prophecy.’ The crowd’s reaction was mixed: some were impressed while others dismissed entirely what Jesus said (“That can’t be right. He’s Joseph’s son!”). Still others were angry with Jesus because he was from Nazareth, yet Jesus didn’t first help and heal the people of his own home town. His first healings were in Capernaum. ‘Why didn’t you help us first?’ Jesus pushed back at their self-centered attitude, and that got them more angry...angry enough that they wanted to throw this healer off a cliff rather than let Jesus help them second. Sounds pretty petty.

It doesn’t stop there. Scribes and Pharisees were coming from all over the region to hear Jesus and see him in action. But when Jesus told a paralyzed man that his sins were forgiven these religious leaders were thrown into a tizzy. To make things worse that night Jesus joined a group of tax collectors for dinner—people the Pharisees thought were clearly sinners. This was just not right! Jesus riled them up even more a few days later by picking kernels of grain off of stocks standing in a field to eat them...on the Sabbath. In the eyes of the Pharisees picking grains counted as work, and thus prohibited on the Sabbath. In contrast, the second story makes it clear that crowds of people were coming out to see him and hear him...even coming from regions well beyond Galilee. The story informs us that even at this early point in his ministry Jesus already had a large crowd of disciples. Even in the midst of all these controversies, many people were astonished by what he could do and moved deeply by his words...moved enough to want to be a follower, see more, learn more.

Out of this large crowd Jesus picked 12 to be his special students...designating them “apostles.” But the story says there were many more disciples, so what does “disciple” mean? That word has two similar but very different definitions. On the one hand it means, simply, a follower. And there were many of those. The Greek word used most commonly for disciple literally means, “those who are called to

follow". We, of the Reformed Christian tradition, have put a special emphasis on this: that God calls us into our relationship with God through the Gospel, and draws us in to that relationship through the work of the Holy Spirit. We believe that God takes an active and personal interest in helping us become disciples. But we've seen in these several stories of Jesus that people clearly have a stake in this as well...a responsibility in deciding how seriously they will take discipleship. There was a multitude of followers but most would have been there because they were star-struck by this new celebrity. Many were going after Jesus because of what they wanted from him: most often healing. Understandably so. So they were "disciples" (that is, followers), to be sure, but many would not have been "disciples" (that is, students to a master).

What a range of reactions to Jesus! There were those people who were dismissive, the put out and ticked off, the angry religious experts, the needy, the hangers-on, the curious...and those who truly wanted to be "disciples": mentored by the master. It was this last group Jesus was looking for, because for Jesus being a disciple was more than being a fan, or a groupie. We hear more and more about this as the gospels unfold. Jesus said, your allegiance to me must be so complete that by comparison it would look like you hate your parents. Jesus said, being a disciple was a calling to live a life of love. he taught, "by this everyone will know you are my disciples, in that you have love one for another". Love who? He said even your enemies. Love how much? Jesus said, following me means taking up your own cross. He called his way the narrow way. This is more than being a fan or a groupie. But the good news is that the one who extends the call also helps us become disciples. Our denomination's statement of faith, "Living Faith", puts it this way, "The Holy Spirit accompanies us on our journey of faith. We may not always be sure of this presence. Yet God's Spirit is with us, sometimes gently, sometimes powerfully, guiding us in the midst of life, as our comfort and help. Christian life is a pilgrimage: it begins, continues and ends with God" (4.2.2). Our statement of faith calls the Christian life a pilgrimage: a conscious, concerted spiritual journey towards the goal of growth in the ways of living like our master.

The majority of Canadians who identify themselves as Christian today do not turn their belief into a discipleship that becomes regularly mentored to the master. Two-thirds of Canadians in surveys will affirm the statement: "Jesus Christ is the Son of God" but less than 1/3 of them ever go to church. A growing phenomenon since the 1960's is what's called "free floating Christians": people who have very vague Christian beliefs that they don't reflect on or act on. For some it's a vague part of their identity. For some it's "fire insurance", that just in case there is a Hell they will have an assured spot in Heaven. If Christianity was like music, these Christians think about attending the odd concert, while Jesus calls us to be musicians. It's a call to follow. Today we are seeing this growing phenomenon of belief without discipleship. But it is only a modern illustration of the reality that has faced people age after age. Discipleship is meant to be life changing. Perhaps this is exactly why the situation is as it is today: many assume no change is needed.

The philosopher Nietzsche once wrote that the only way to live life is to find a standard and then live that standard as “a long obedience in the same direction.” The lead singer of the band U2 was entranced by this idea. Paul Hewson (known by his stage name Bono) was raised in a Christian home growing up in Ireland. But it was during high school that faith became core for him. That happened through a student Bible study group. With his bandmates (who are also Christian) they find their music so often inspired by and influenced by their faith. They frequently end concerts singing their adaptation of Psalm 40. In addition to his music, Bono is best known for his compassion for people in need. It flows from how he has been mentored by Jesus as a disciple. So he pursues causes such as third-world debt relief and AIDS in Africa. Bono reflected on what Christian discipleship means to him in one wonderful interview where the exchange went like this. “What is the one thing the Psalms has taught you about God?” “He listens.” “What is the one thing the Psalms has taught you about yourself?” “I don’t listen enough.” “What is the one difficult or troubling thing the Psalms has required of you?” “Honesty.” For Bono listening for God with honesty and reflecting on your own life honestly is the critical ingredient that shapes his “long obedience in the same direction” as he sorts out his discipleship. As an example of that honesty, Bono has spoken openly about how his faith was challenged when he unexpectedly ended up in hospital for emergency spinal surgery, and ended up there again 4 years later after a bicycle accident. “My faith hit a few bumps at those times” he reflected, but said he came through it grateful to God for life and with faith intact. For Bono, discipleship depends on grace. When you read the Bible, he says, you find murderers, prostitutes, liars, such selfish people. But God accepted them and worked with them. For Bono, that’s what keeps him on the “long obedience in the same direction”: knowing that God is always nudging him back on the path of discipleship. Reflecting those priorities for grace and honesty, Bono has said “I’m really interested in grace because I am so dependent upon it. If my future depends on karma then I’m really in trouble.”

Honesty about God. Honesty about yourself. Depending on God’s grace in one’s discipleship. We see these elements in today’s story. Out of the large crowd of disciples with Jesus that day, he chose 12 to be “apostles”: those he would train to be the ones “sent out” in mission. So who was it that Jesus saw as having what was needed to be apostles? The ones to be sent out to do the work of God’s Kingdom? This is the most telling part of this story. We have the impetuous Peter: the guy who always thought he was right, that he could do it all on his own, the guy who occasionally questioned and corrected Jesus! The one who would profess the greatest loyalty to Jesus, but when challenged would not be able to screw his courage to the sticking place. We have Thomas, the one who would need hard evidence in order to believe. We have the easily impressed Nathaniel, who chose to follow Jesus just because Jesus recalled seeing him the day before Jesus actually talked to him. We have Matthew, a tax collector. Tax collectors were universally reviled by the Jews for being complicit with the Romans. He was probably quite wealthy. And we have Simon the Zealot. The Zealots were political activists whose number one concern in life was throwing the Romans out of Judea. Simon would have little love for Matthew. We have the fishermen – blue collar workers. Compared to Matthew: quite poor. We have Judas, who would ultimately betray Jesus. These people were not spiritual superstars. They weren’t the cream of the crop.

They were people like us. Every day joe's who came from different walks of life... but heard the call to be disciples, who would say yes to being mentored by Jesus. Jesus chose to work with that lot.

So too Jesus chooses to work with us—us who have our own foibles. Discipleship is “a long obedience in the same direction.” But Jesus also assured his followers, “my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Thank God for the graciousness of our master.