

Follow Me

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on September 1, 1996.
Scripture Lessons: Exodus 3:1-15; Psalms 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AMEN

Harry Rhodewalt, a former member of our church, stopped by the office last week. He told this story. He claims it's true. I don't know. You'll have to decide for yourself based on what you know of Harry. He said up there where he and Betty live several churches were plagued with bats in the attics of their sanctuaries. The Presbyterian minister, the Baptist minister and the Roman Catholic priest were discussing the situation. The Roman Catholic priest said he found an ancient ritual for the exorcism of bats from churches in an old Latin prayer book. He tried it. The bats all left. But the next day they all came back again. The Baptist minister said he tried smoking out the bats and drowning them in their baptismal pool. But somehow they survived and all came back. The Presbyterian minister was sitting there looking kind of smug. He said, "Our session enrolled all the bats in our new members class. We taught them about the history and government of the church and what we believe and then we made them members and not one has been back since."

One of the reasons why new members classes are often so unsuccessful is that, instead of aiming to get people to follow Jesus, we settle for mere church membership. William Willimon, a Methodist minister, struggled with the problem of new members coming in the front door, joining, and, then, almost immediately, going out the back door where they were never seen again. He wanted to change that.

One layperson told him, "we've, first, got to define what it is we want to happen as a result of a new members class. What's the end product? What do we hope to accomplish through our new members classes?"

I was thinking about that question when I was preparing for Bob Bush's Memorial Service last month. I thought, "What I'd like to see happen in our new members classes is a group of men and women and young people who may one day grow up to resemble Bob Bush. All I want is a group of new members who, in their beliefs and lives, come to look like our best Christians." How do we go about doing that?

(Paul Philips
No. 10
Pack 10.11
Harold High)

Tertullian, an ancient church father from Africa, used to say, "Christians are made, not born." Following Jesus is not something that comes naturally, without time and training. Following Jesus is so much more than simply believing that he's the Son of God and Savior. A Christian is so much more. A Christian is someone who not only believes but follows Christ.

Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Mother Theresa of Calcutta is one of the most outstanding illustrations of someone who has taken up her cross and followed Jesus. But few of us are Mother Theresa. Nevertheless, we're called to follow Jesus in our ordinary, everyday lives.

An ordinary people, like us, can follow Jesus. I just finished a book our discussion group will be discussing in a

couple of week. It's called, The Journey of August King. Set against the landscape of North Carolina's Appalacian mountains, The Journey of August King, chronicles the journey of two people. August King is the handsome farmer, devastated by the loss of his wife, Sarah. Annalees Williamsburg is the beautiful young runaway slave who crosses August's path one summer day. August is no heroic, abolitionist. He's simply an ordinary, hard working, church going, law abiding man - but he finds ~~him~~^{himself} doing strange, unexplainable, heroic things he never knew he was capable of. He never makes one big, heroic decision to help Anna escape. He just makes a bunch of little decisions that end up allowing Anna to escape to freedom but at such a cost to August.

Trying to do the right thing, the Christian thing, for a starving runaway slave he ends us losing everything. He loses his milk cow. He loses his pig. He loses his geese. He loses all the supplies he traveled three days to buy. He loses his horse. He loses his cart. He gives his wife's clothes to the runaway. And then, confronted by his neighbors for his crime of helping a runaway slave, he loses his standing in the community and his house is burned down. But, in the end, August says, "I've lost everything but I've never been so proud."

August never planned to be a hero. He was an accidental hero. He was just an ordinary person like you or me. But, because he followed Jesus just one step at a time he was able to do something heroic in the end.

In the words of St. Paul, he hated what is evil. He was patient in suffering. He extended hospitality to strangers. He

wept with those who weep. He sought to live in harmony with all. He associated with the lowly. He never claimed to be wiser than he was. He was not overcome by evil, but he overcame evil with good. He obeyed the words of St. Paul. He followed Jesus.

Some of you may be asking, "What do you mean by following Jesus? Do you mean being super-spiritual? Do you mean trying to be a 'goody-two-shoes?'" I think what Paul says in our epistle lesson is a perfect illustration of what someone who follows Jesus lives.

Following Jesus means that we let our love for Christ and one another be genuine. That's probably nowhere more difficult to do in our own homes and with our own families. "Let love be genuine." And when we follow Jesus we hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Following Jesus means hating some things. It means, for example, hating racism, hating poverty, hating doing things that hurt and destroy ~~other~~ other people. And when Jesus calls us to follow him he calls us to "love one another in showing honor." Don't say demeaning things that put down loved ones. And when Jesus calls us to follow him he calls us to "contribute to the needs of the saints and to extend hospitality to strangers."

Stanley Hauerwas sitting next to a Bishop - opposed to reducing state funding to the homeless...

People who follow Jesus bless those who persecute us. We bless and do not curse them. We rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. We live in harmony with one another. We make every effort to live peaceably with all people. Needless to say, it's not easy to follow Jesus and the best of us lag far behind Jesus. *yet we can begin ... if only it means taking*

little baby steps

Some of us hesitate to follow Jesus. We put forth all kinds of intellectual arguments. We're not sure if we can believe that Jesus was really born of a virgin. We're not sure if Jesus really rose from the dead. We can't understand how his death on the cross can bring about salvation for the whole world. We have no absolute proof for the existence of the God whom Christians know as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so we hesitate to follow Jesus within the church.

Well let me tell you about one person who didn't let his intellectual questions and doubts keep him from following Jesus. Did you know that before Albert Schweitzer became a missionary to Africa he was one of Europe's leading Biblical Scholars? He wrote a classic academic work entitled, The Quest for the Historical Jesus. ^{At the end of the book it's clear that} ~~At the end of years of study~~ he wasn't sure what he could believe about Jesus. He questioned everything. But he didn't let his questions stand in the way of following Jesus. He decided to deal with questions through following Jesus. ^{He concludes his quest for the Historical Jesus with} ~~At the end of his classic book about the historical Jesus~~ ^{these moving words,} he writes:

"(Jesus) comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfil 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."

Jesus reveals himself - not through academic research or valuable studies and as much as I personally enjoy intellectual pursuits. No Jesus reveals himself when we follow him

And so He did. Schweitzer gave up his academic career and went to Africa as a missionary doctor in Lambarene, French Equatorial Africa, now Gabon. He spent the rest of his life doctoring and nursing the poorest of the poor... despite the questions he initially had about the historical Jesus. But as he followed Jesus, he came to know the truth of who Jesus is. Jesus revealed Himself to Schweitzer in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings through which He and Schweitzer passed.

And Jesus will reveal himself to us also if we just follow him. Most of us here this morning are professing Christians. But are we following Jesus? What is Jesus calling you to do today? What journey is he calling you to make? What decisions to make?

Jesus calls you and me to follow him. ~~"Do not become overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."~~ And the only when we can do this is by taking the humiliating path of self denial and cross-bearing that Jesus took. Follow Jesus. Don't look around and think of who should be following Jesus. You follow Jesus. Don't make excuses because somebody else isn't following. You follow.

Follow me, follow me.
Take up your cross and follow me.
Follow me, follow Me:
Take up your cross and follow me.

Let's sing that chorus again.

Let us pray: O Christ, who lived to show what life is like, who died to show that sin is death, who rose to raise us up to life eternal, help us to follow you and love you, forever. Amen.