

## THE PERILS OF FOLLOWING JESUS

Matthew 16:21-28

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A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson  
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September 1, 2002

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

Soren Kierkegaard was an eccentric 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish theologian who has taught me a lot. In one of his works he said he attended a church service. The sanctuary was highly ornate with gold and silver decorations, padded pews, and expensive woodcarvings. The pastor stood up from his cushioned chair that resembled the throne of a king and walked to the pulpit wearing exquisite vestments of gold and silver encrusted with rubies and sapphires. Kierkegaard, who was never politically correct, described the minister as weighing, he was sure, over 400 pounds. The minister chose as his text that morning the words of Jesus. "If anyone comes after me let him deny himself..." After the reading of the scripture Kierkegaard commented, "I was amazed that nobody laughed." ~~Laughter would have been most fitting because it was so incongruous~~ with the affluence on display in that sanctuary.

Kierkegaard's story doesn't make me laugh. It makes me feel uncomfortable. I've never suffered as a church member except, maybe, when I was a little boy and my mother made me suffer through Sunday school and church every week. Most of us have *not* had to suffer *because* we're Christians. Of course, we suffer the same grief and sorrow common to all humans but few of us suffer as a result of our profession of faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, we receive benefits. You get to present your children for baptism. You get free use of the sanctuary when you get married (except for a small stipend to the organist and sexton for their extra work). You get a free funeral reception when you die paid for by the deacons and served by the Presbyterian Women. Just about the only harassment you receive for being a member is when you're asked to teach Sunday school, prepare a meal, or provide snacks. If you don't pay your Lions Club dues

you'll be dropped from the rolls, but many remain on our church rolls even though they haven't contributed financially or attended for years. And that's okay because we're a different kind of institution than a service club or fraternal organization.

We can no more identify church membership with following Christ than we can equate the church with the kingdom of God. Ideally, church membership entails following Christ just as ideally the church is the visible expression of the kingdom of God. But we don't live in an ideal world. We live in a fallen world. Think of what we do to be a member of the Church? The elders ask: Do you turn from sin? Do you turn to Jesus Christ and trust him as your savior? Will you be Christ's faithful disciple? Will you be a faithful member of this congregation? *Sometimes in the formality, the tradition, and the celebration of confirmation we forget that behind those vows are the powerful words of Jesus. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."* I like the comment Father Daniel

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Berrigan made on these words of Christ. He said, "If you want to follow Jesus, you had better look good on wood." What did Jesus have in mind when he told would be followers that we must deny ourselves and take up our cross?

First, at the very least Jesus is talking about priorities. Jesus wants to be the highest priority in our lives. If the Risen Christ weren't the source of our life, his demand would be that of a megalomaniac. But we believe the Risen Christ is Lord.

We all have a long list of important people and activities that make demands on our lives: Family, friends, nation, job, church, education, athletics, music and dance lessons, gender, race, lifestyle, recreation, as well as Christian discipleship. Where does Christ fit in with all these other demands on our lives? Christ doesn't want to displace these important demands, but he does want to be at the center of our lives, thoughts and actions. Think of Christ as being in the

center of the circle of our lives. Place around that circle, like spokes on a wheel, family, friends, job, education, athletics, recreation and so forth. What if all these activities and relationships revolved around Jesus? What Jesus said has to do with getting our priorities straight. If Christ really is the source of our life, then any relationship, commitment, or activity that displaces Christ from the center of our lives leads inevitably to loss.

Second, the words of Jesus speak of danger and adventure that will always be a part of following Christ. When we follow Christ, we enter on a risky journey that leads through danger. In 1934 the Confessing Church in Germany took a stand against Hitler when the majority of Christians supported his new regime. The Confessing Church chose a risky path, one that led, for some, to rejection, public humiliation, and death. The Christian faith was also a dangerous adventure for Martin Luther King, Jr. He said from Reidsville State Prison in Georgia, "This is the cross that we must bear for the freedom of our people." Brazilian Bishop, Dom Helder Camara, leader of the nonviolent movement for democracy in Latin America said, "We shall not walk on roses, people will not throng to hear us and applaud, and we shall not always be aware of divine protection. If we are to be pilgrims for justice and peace, we must expect the desert." "God has not promised us safety," warns Stanley Hauerwas of Duke Divinity School, but rather "participation in an adventure called the kingdom. That seems to me to be great good news in a world that is literally dying of boredom." The words of Jesus point to the adventure and danger of following Christ.

Third, the words of Jesus call us to make sacrifices. "Let them deny themselves," Jesus said. Is it possible for the Church today to expect its members to make sacrifices for the sake of following Christ? Is it possible to convince people that the way to real life will not come from immediate self-gratification? One who follows Christ sacrifices a real present pleasure in the

hopes of receiving joy and fulfillment sometime in the future – either in this life or the next. Jesus calls his followers to deny self and make sacrifices. That's a tough sell in a culture of indulgence. Can we sacrifice something important in our lives to volunteer at the Lighthouse ministry, or the Oxford Educational Foundation, or Wednesday's Word? Can we sacrifice our job security and refuse to "go along" with an unjust policy? When Jesus says, "Let them deny themselves" he want us to put him at the center of our lives rather than our *selves*.

I realize I rarely emphasize the perils of following Christ. In fact, preachers sometimes project the message that if we tithe we'll get a good return on our investments. Or if we follow Christ, we and our loved ones will be delivered from illness, accident, suffering and death? Steve Arterburn, cofounder of a large Christian counseling ministry, was asked, "What prevents us from sharing our problems more openly at church?" He answered, "Just look at what invitation to conversion we use. 'Come to Jesus, and your life is going to be wonderful. It's going to be great, fantastic. All these problems are going to go away.' There's some truth to that, but when you hear Dietrich Bonhoeffer say, 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die,' that's the reality that I've seen in the Christian faith. I have problems now I would never have had if I hadn't accepted Christ. There's guilt that I've experienced that I would never even have thought twice about. We have to be realistic with people and tell them that when you come to Jesus, there is a new purpose and a fulfillment, but the struggle is going to continue. We have so many lukewarm Christians or people who turn away from the faith because they've been promised this ease."

God of mercy: Help us to forgive, as you have forgiven us. Help us to trust you, even when hope is failing. Help us to take up our cross daily and follow you in your redeeming work; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.