

“FOLLOWING JESUS”
November 6, 2011
First Presbyterian Church
Spartanburg, South Carolina

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

This sermon began innocently enough several years ago, when I was spending the week at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey. During the course of the week I had the opportunity to have lunch with the President of the Seminary, who at that time was Dr. Tom Gillespie. After lunch we wandered next door to the Seminary bookstore. As I was browsing through some books, my host gave me a copy of a book that he said he wanted me to read. The name of the book was *Christianity at the Crossroads* and it was written by a Jesuit priest in El Salvador by the name of Jan Sobrino. One of the haunting aspects of the book was the haunting question: “Are we believing in Christ or following Jesus?”

Sobrino makes the point that most of the emphasis in the church has been on believing in Christ. The great councils at Nicaea and Chalcedon focused on such important questions as the relationship between God and Christ and the critical question of whether Jesus was both “fully God” and “fully man”

Now, these are critical questions and they are particularly crucial in a time in which the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is being challenged both inside and outside the church. But Sobrino 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 call of four disciples: Andrew, Peter, James, and John. Mark’s gospel does not contain stories that tell of the birth of Jesus. There are no narratives about Jesus’ childhood. Mark begins his gospel 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. Each of these men was a fisherman and in each of the ‘call stories’ the movement is the same. Jesus encounters an individual. He calls to that person, “Follow me”. Then we read that “immediately they left their nets and followed him”.

So, this morning we confront 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 one’s cross, and following Jesus”.

We don’t hear much about this today. We are the “me generation” where everything has to be about “me”. Most of us today are about ‘finding ourselves’,

‘fulfilling ourselves’, or ‘reinventing ourselves’, but not much is heard about ‘denying oneself for the sake of Jesus and his gospel’.

Dwight L. Moody, the famous evangelist, once told about a very successful businessman who came up to Moody after one of his revival meetings. “I’m a self-made man,” he said to Dr. Moody. “I’m a self-made man.”

“Well,” replied Moody. “You certainly have lifted a great burden from the shoulders of the Almighty”.

That is the point that Sobrino makes 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 giving mental assent to the church’s understanding of the nature of Christ.

But following Jesus is something radically different. Following Jesus has to do with a person’s life. It has to do with a person’s life, values, priorities, and surrender.

Jesus made it very clear that there was a cost to discipleship. When he called James and John to be his disciples, he called them to leave their father and to follow him. When another person objected that he could not follow Jesus because that person had to first bury his father, Jesus replied, “Let the dead bury the dead”.

So let us make no mistake. The Christian life makes demands on us. On this Dedication Sunday we are reminded that all of us have a responsibility for the life of this church. Stewardship is always more than the financial resources a person gives to the church. But it is never less than that.

Several years ago I came across a remarkable biography entitled *The Life of Sir Thomas More* by Peter Ackroyd. Thomas More was the only person in the history of England who was a Knight of the Round Table, a Saint of the Church, and a Martyr as well. Thomas More’s life was commemorated a few years ago by a play and a 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 because More represents something that is an enigma to us - a person willing to die for something in which he believed.

Thomas More was one of the most respected people 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.

Thomas More was a very wealthy man with a large manor on the Thames River. The guest book at his house would have read like a “Who’s Who” of Europe’s most prominent citizens.

But something happened that changed Thomas More. Henry VIII divorced his wife Katherine and married Anne Boleyn. Every person in the realm was required to take an oath in support of the King’s action. But Thomas More could not take the oath. The King urged him to take the oath, but More refused. His own family begged him to take the oath. “After all,” his wife pleaded, “the king is going to marry Anne Boleyn. What difference,” she asked, “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 wrote that ‘when Christ calls a person, he calls that person to come and die.’ There is a lot of talk about ‘believing in Christ’. But how often do we talk about following Jesus?

In all my years in the church I don’t remember anyone asking me if I was willing to ‘follow Jesus’ - not when as a young person I was confirmed in the church, not even 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 believe in the Virgin Birth or if I held the ‘Substitutionary’ view of the atonement. But know one ever asked me, “Bill Wood, are you willing to follow Jesus?”

III.

Then, too, following Jesus means not only that our lives must conform 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 *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 thing that Mark’s gospel makes clear about Jesus. He was not beholden to Herod, to the Scribes and Pharisees or to 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 is one of the most appealing and disturbing aspects of Jesus. He never seemed to have any need to acquire things. He lived with a remarkable amount of simplicity and 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, “That’s not quite right”. The problem that the Jews who were slaves in Egypt had was not letting Pharaoh go; it was getting Pharaoh to let them go.

That was the whole nature of Moses’ struggle with the King of Egypt. The King would not allow the people to leave their bondage to slavery and return to their own land. But the more I thought about it the more it 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 there was no regular bread or water. So 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 to die in the wilderness. The great problem in the wilderness was that the people of Israel 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 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 completed my giving to the church, why is it that I still have so much left over? If I am following Jesus, then why I am 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 out early for death?

Somehow I get the feeling today that we are missing the point. We talk a lot in the church about ‘orthodoxy’ which is ‘right belief’. But there is such a thing as ‘orthopraxy’, which means right action.

Today, we live in a ‘celebrity culture’ that is fascinated with people like Charlie Sheen, Paris Hilton, or Lindsay Lohan. We are obsessed with movie stars, professional athletes, and television stars.

But saints? What about saints? On this “All Saints Sunday” we pause to remember those in the life of this church who by their lives and actions have given so much to so many.

On the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary there are a number of plaques that are placed on the wall of the MacKay Campus Center. These plaques mark the lives of some of the graduates of that school who gave their lives in Christian service.

One of the plaques reads:

OF THESE THE WORLD WAS NOT WORTHY

WALTER MACON LOWRIE, class of 1840.
Thrown overboard by pirates in the China Sea 1847

JOHN EDGAR FREEMAN, class of 1838
ROBERT McMULLEN, class of 1853
Who with their wives were shot by order of Nan Sahib,
1857 at Cawnpore, India

LENE JANVIER, class of 1840
Stabbed by a Sikh fanatic at Lodiana, India 1864

ISIDOR LOEWENTHAL, class of 1854
Shot accidentally or by design at Peshawar, India

JOHN ROGERS PEALE, class of 1905
Killed with his wife by a mob at Lien Chou, China
1905

Now, none of these individuals are household names. None of them would have ever made the cover of *Time Magazine*. None of them wrote a best seller. None of them would have appeared on Oprah or on late-night television. And yet each one gave his or her life to the cause of Christ.

So, on this Dedication Sunday, I want to ask the question: “Are you following Jesus or are you just believing in Christ?”

“It’s an unfair question”, you might reply. “It is 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!