

“Follow Me”

Introduction: Mothers, do you remember the first word your child ever spoke? My hunch is that you do, and that you may have even recorded it in something called “Baby’s First Year” or some such title! How about on the other end of life: children – those of you whose mothers have died – do you recall her last words? If you do, chances are you might have written those down in a journal of some sort. First words are significant – they indicate that a new stage in life has begun. And last words are often significant – they can be indicative of something the person who utters them wants everyone within earshot to hear.

What is significant when we turn to the account of the life of Jesus, as recorded in the gospel of John, is that the first, and the last, words that Jesus spoke, at the beginning and at the end of his ministry, are the same: “Follow me.” And not only then but scattered throughout this gospel we hear Jesus saying, on at least a half dozen more occasions, “Follow me.” Do you think, maybe, Jesus was trying to tell us something?

I think that he was. I think that he was trying to tell us that following him is the most important and significant thing that we could ever do. So let’s return to that walk along the beach he was taking with Peter, and hear his last recorded words. Then we’ll explore some of the truths those words convey.

I. Relationship

A. To follow Jesus means, first of all, that our faith is directed and devoted to a person and not a set of ideals, morals, or rules. A writer named David Watson draws into sharp focus the centrality of the person of Jesus to our faith. He writes:

When Buddha was dying, his disciples asked how they could best remember him. He told them not to bother; it was his teaching, not his person, that counted. With Jesus it was altogether different. Everything centers on *him*, his person. [Our faith] means knowing *him*, loving *him*, believing *him*, being committed to *him*. [*Called and Committed*, 9]

B. In other words, the message of Jesus cannot be separated from who he is, what he has done for us, and what he still wants to do for, and in, us. Christianity is a relationship with the living God, with Immanuel – which we remember every Christmas means “God with us.” To draw on Psalm 23, when we walk through the valley of the shadows, we’re not accompanied by a good theodicy but by a Good Shepherd. We’re accompanied best not by a full orbed understanding of evil and suffering but by one who walks with us in our suffering. Pentecost, which we’ll celebrate in a few weeks, emphasizes how that Shepherd takes up residence within us in the person of his Spirit, and dwells with us, comforting and convicting, revealing and refreshing.

Illustration: I remember watching one of Thais’ softball games, many years ago. One little girl had just struck out and her other was concerned. But instead of shouting out a bunch of commands and directions about where her hands and feet and bat should be, the mom simply walked over to where her daughter was crying, picked up a bat, and demonstrated what a batter should look like. In essence she said, “Follow me.” Following Jesus means entering a relationship with one who comes to be with us and doesn’t just issue instructions but shows us how we are to best live.

II. Movement

A. One of the key images the biblical writers use to describe our life of faith is the image of walking. If we're going to follow, we'll need to step out and to walk! As Paul describes it for the congregation in Ephesus: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." And bit later he adds, "I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling you have received . . ." (Eph. 2:10; 4:1).

B. As a theologian named Kevin Vanhoozer puts it, as he describes how Jesus came not just to make converts, but disciples, or apprentices as we have defined the word:

A convert is one who has repented of the past, turns around, and faces the future with faith in Jesus. A disciple is one who does not simply face a new direction but begins to walk in it. A disciple is a convert in motion..." (*Hearers and Doers*, xxv).

C. This motion is captured in Vanhoozer's title, *Hearers and Doers*. Or as we conclude the reading of the Scripture each week, "May God bless the hearing and the living [doing] of his word." This implies that simply believing something doesn't move us along toward becoming more and more like Jesus. At the conclusion of his Sermon on the Mount, he puts it simply: the one who hears his words but does not put them into practice is like one who builds the foundation of his life on sand. It will not stand up very well to the pressures of life (Ma. 7:24-27; cf. Lk. 8:21).

There needs to be movement, direction, doing, to our following.

III. Dying

A. To follow Jesus into the new life he holds out for us involves a kind of death. Mothers, I believe you have a very keen and healthy understanding of this! That's because when you carry, deliver, and raise a child, you undergo a kind of dying. You quickly discover that your body is no longer your own, your time is no longer your own, your mind is no longer your own, a night of uninterrupted sleep is no longer your own, your career goals may no longer be your own. But if you're going to bring a new life into this world, it very often involves dying to your own agenda. Yet, while this process will include its times of misery, in the end it leads to a beautiful new creation.

B. This paradox of death in order to bring about new life is given voice by Jesus at one point when he says: "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (Jn. 12:24). Jesus, I think, was trying to make this clear to Peter. Jesus tells him that while he is relatively free now to move about as he wishes, when he gets older his life will be characterized by limitations. In fact, as "stretching out your hands" is the language of crucifixion, it sounds like Peter is going to die the death of a martyr, but it will be a death through which God is glorified and much fruit comes to life. To follow Jesus may mean there will be times and places and experiences to which he leads us which are not comfortable, but which will be used by God for our good and his glory.

IV. Daily

A. Finally (for today), following Jesus means that we are embarking on a life-long pursuit, not just a weekend hobby. The disciples had been following Jesus for three years, during which time he continually said, "follow me." Then, after his resurrection, he didn't say, "ok, you're all done following,"

but he continued to call them to follow him. When Rick Warren is asked how long it takes to become a Christian, he answers: a moment and a lifetime. We can enter our new identity in Christ in a moment of new birth, but we grow and develop into that identity for the rest of our lives.

B. I don't always like, but I'm reminded of the need for, this daily perspective every time I open the Daily Office app on my phone. This "office" is a series of daily readings and prayers that comes from the Book of Common Prayer. Each morning begins with an opening verse, followed by a confession of sin (essentially the one we use on Communion Sundays). That's the part I don't always like because there are times I look at it and say to myself, well, yesterday wasn't all that bad of a day; I was a pretty good guy and really don't have anything to confess today. Let's just move on and save this confession for "special" occasions.

But on my better days I allow it to remind me that following Jesus is a daily practice, and that repentance is not a one-time act or one reserved for special occasions but a continuous turning and walking away from the old life that is our identity in Adam, and a continuous walking toward our new life in Jesus.

C. As we heard in our reading from Colossians, there is much to walk away from, ways that are not pleasing to God – sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, and lying (3:5-9). And, there is much God calls us to walk toward as we are being renewed as new creations in the image of Jesus – compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love, just to name a few (3:12-14).

Following Jesus is a daily journey.

So that we may participate in the beauty and the purposes of God in our lives and in our world, may we listen for those places where Jesus might be whispering, "follow me." And may we enjoy the wonderful relationship that this invitation offers as we move toward the life that is truly life and die, daily, to that which does not bring life to us or to others.