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Following Jesus - Mark 8:27-38

One Friday morning, Rev. Henry Maxwell, went upstairs to his study and sat down at his desk to put the finishing touches on his Sunday sermon. His text was 1 Peter 2:21—"For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps." As he worked away, his concentration was broken by the annoying ring of the door bell. Impatiently, he got up from his desk and went to the front door, finding a shabbily dressed man looking for work. Rev. Maxwell explained that he was very busy and had no time to be of help. Closing the door, he sent the man on his way.

On Sunday morning, before the sermon, a soprano sang as a solo, the well known hymn, "Where he leads me I will follow, I'll go with him, with him all the way." Rev. Maxwell delivered his message with precision and passion. And then, just as he finished and a quartet was preparing to sing the closing selection, there was a remarkable interruption. From the rear of the sanctuary, a man began walking down the center aisle toward the front of the church. Rev. Maxwell recognized him as the same man who had appeared his door on Friday. Looking at the preacher, the man asked what Jesus meant when he said, "Follow me" and what Christians mean by "following the steps of Jesus."

The visitor continued his speech, "I understand you can't all go out of your way to hunt up jobs for people like me. I'm not asking you to, but what I feel puzzled about is, what is meant by following Jesus. . . . Somehow I get puzzled when I see so many Christians living in luxury and singing 'Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow thee,' and remember how my wife died in a tenement in New York City, gasping for air and asking God to take the little girl, too. Of course, I don't expect you people can prevent every one from dying of starvation, lack of proper nourishment and tenement air, but what does following Jesus mean?"

That question haunted Charles Sheldon, who wrote about it in his amazingly popular book *In His Steps*. It inspired the social gospel movement, which envisioned, in the words of the great Baptist theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, the transformation of "human society into the kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstituting them with the will of God." But as we have witnessed it can also be reduced to a slogan on a bracelet with the letters WWJD, short for "What would Jesus do?" Surely it means more than that, but what *does* it mean to follow Jesus?

Several years ago, I made a pilgrimage with my father and two brothers, to Israel. It was my father's desire, and secretly it was mine as well, to follow Jesus by walking where he walked. It was, then, with a note of surprise and not a little disappointment that my father confessed that so much of the Holy Land looked like, in his words, "God-forsaken West Texas." Our director had the good sense to suggest that we should indeed walk, not ride in the comfort of an air-conditioned bus, but walk where Jesus walked. And so we did: into waters of the Jordon, along the Sea of Galilee, up the mount of Beatitudes, down the Kidron Valley. But surprisingly I found myself thinking we might be coming close to understanding what it means to follow Jesus in the Golan Heights, at a place the local Arabs call Banias, near the ancient city of Caesarea Philippi.

Standing beneath those towering red rock cliffs, I imagined Jesus asking his disciples: “Who do people say that I am?” and their reply, “John the Baptizer” or “Elijah” or “one of the prophets.” And then I thought about Jesus’ more pointed question: “But you, who do *you* say that I am?” and Peter’s reply, “You are the Christ.” In that moment Jesus seemed very close. It brought to mind the memory of Brother Eddie Martin, in his red suit and white shoes, asking one night in a revival service: “Who do *you* say he is? Nobody can answer the question for you. Who is Jesus Christ to *you*?” That was when dawned on me that I had to declare something. So that night I made my confession of faith in Jesus Christ as “my personal Lord and Savior.” It may not have been as theologically coherent as the Apostles’ Creed, but it was *my* confession of faith. And in confessing my faith in Jesus Christ, I joined a tradition going back to the earliest Baptists who maintained that before anyone may be admitted into church membership they must first testify to “the experience of grace.” Experienced Christians were folks who had offered a personal confession of faith like Peter.

But as important as Peter’s confession was, there was more. This confession was only the first step. It must be followed by many others—difficult and dangerous. The foothills of Mt. Hermon were a long way from Jerusalem. But Jesus could surely sense what lay ahead, and so he warned them that he would undergo great suffering, be rejected, and put to death, yet by God’s hand he would be vindicated. It was shocking news to the disciples who like other Jews of that day thought of the Messiah mostly in militant political terms as a Davidic king who would deliver Israel from its enemies. There were many things they imagined and hoped for when the promised Messiah was to be revealed, but one thing they could not conceive of was the Messiah suffering. And in all fairness to the disciples, there is no evidence in the canonical or non-canonical literature of pre-Christian Judaism to suggest a suffering Messiah. How could they have imagined that the Messiah and suffering were in any way associated except that the Messiah would cause the enemies of Israel to suffer? But there it was: They believed Jesus to be the Messiah, and Jesus announced he would suffer.

The conflict was just too much for Peter, who blurted out something like “You lie!” Can you imagine anyone saying such a thing? Surely no good Southern God-fearing Christian would ever have the audacity to correct the Master like that, would he? But maybe again we might just have to say something, if he had the gall to make an outrageous proposal that called us to sacrifice and service. Somebody had to do it. Turning to the disciples, who apparently silently agreed, Jesus rebuked Peter, saying, “Get behind me, Satan!” Trying to avoid the way of servanthood is the sort of stinking thinking that has no place in the kingdom of God. It must be exorcised. Yet even in this admonition, there was hope that Peter and the rest might still line up behind Jesus so that when they got to that “hill far away” there would not be just one “old rugged cross,” but thirteen waiting as “emblem[s] of suffering and shame.” This way of the servant is full of paradox: For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for the sake of the good news will save it. It is a strange truth, this gospel.

A few years ago I made another pilgrimage to Bedfordshire, England, in the land of John Bunyan: through the wicket gate of the old door at the Elstow Church where the pilgrimage began, to the old manse of St. John’s Church which is Interpreter’s House, down to the waters of the Great Ouse River where Bunyan was baptized. Bunyan wrote his story *The Pilgrim’s Progress* during those twelve years he spent in the Bedford jail with only his Bible and a copy of *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*. He knew the way was fraught with wind and weather, besetting confounders and dismal stories, lions and giants, hobgoblins and foul fiends, and yet his first (and last) avowed intent was to be a pilgrim. I think old John Bunyan showed us something of what it means to deny oneself, take up the cross, and follow Jesus.

In his book, *The Glad River*, Will Campbell tells the story of a young man from Mississippi named Doops Momber. He had never been baptized. In fact, he refused to be baptized because he came to the conclusion that there weren’t any *real* Baptists around. Not the sort of Landmarkers, who claimed to be

the *real* Baptists by tracing their genealogy back to John the Baptist, but the ones like the stories he read in *The Martyrs Mirror*. Folks didn't appreciate Doops' stickling on this matter. He was constantly pressured by his family, humiliated by the church, criticized by the community, and, at one point, even condemned by a court because he had not been baptized. But he held firm. He eventually decided to write a book about his search. When asked what his book was about, Doops said, "It's about how there aren't any Baptists left in the world . . . an extinct species, I think." Doops eventually got baptized, but not by a Baptist. He was baptized by one of his Roman Catholic friends, and not by immersion in the traditional Baptist style, but by water cupped in the hand and poured. It was time to be baptized because his friend's life was clearly shaped by the radical claim that if anyone wants to become a follower of Jesus, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him.

When my two older children were beginning to ask about baptism, I thought about Doops Momber. So I began reading *The Martyrs Mirror* to them, for bedtime stories. We read about people being burned and drowned, having gunpowder put in their hair and set on fire, having their witness silenced with tongue screws, and much more. It wasn't long before my wife put a stop to that. But not before one story in particular stood out. It was the story of old Dirk Willems. Dirk was arrested in 1569 in Asperen, Holland, but the story of his apprehension is remarkable. He was being pursued by an authority of state. It was in the middle of winter, and Dirk attempted to escape by crossing over the river which was frozen. His lone pursuer followed him across the ice, but broke through and fell into freezing water. Rather than continuing on, Dirk Willems turned back, and pulled the man out, thus saving his life while forfeiting his own. And so it happened that Dirk Willems was imprisoned, tried, and executed.

I later learned that this is the story Mennonite grandmothers tell to their grandchildren before they are baptized. And I think it might not be a bad one to tell to all those who enter into those dangerous baptismal waters which unite us with Christ's suffering and death and out of which we are raised to live in the new life of his resurrection. In the end, the really important question isn't whether we've been fully immersed or sprinkled, or even at what age it is administered, but whether after rising out of the waters of the glad river we take up the cross and follow in the steps of our crucified and risen master, who said, "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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Are you ready to get behind Jesus and start following him?

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen. (From Morning Prayer Rite II as published in *The Book of Common Prayer*)