

September 10, 2017

National Presbyterian Church

On the Road With Jesus I: A Person Worth Following

Matthew 4:18-22; 9:9, 27; 16:24; 20:29-34; and John 10:27; 12:26

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Through the fall in our Sunday sermons we're going to be thinking about "Christian faith and character" using the image of "a journey" "journeys" of course can be understood as both literal and metaphorical – descriptive of life in terms both of geography and time and to think this way is as old as the hills

In the Old Testament part of the Bible

- The story of Abraham is a story about a journey: across the Middle East from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to the promised land (of course, it's also more story of Abraham's spiritual journey with God)
- Then, the story of Moses and Joshua, is about a journey from Egypt back to the promised land (also from slavery to freedom)

And in the New Testament

- the story of Jesus is a story, in part at least, about his journeys around Galilee in the north of Israel and then his fateful journey to Jerusalem in the south, and then the Palm Sunday journey down the Mt of Olives, and on to the cross of Calvary;
- And then too, the story of the early church tells the story of the journeys of the apostle Paul from Jerusalem to Damascus and then back and forth across the Mediterranean Sea until he brings the message of Jesus into the heart of the Roman Empire – into the great city of Rome itself.

And this theme is not only in the Bible, but it's shared in literature both ancient in modern from Homer's Odyssey and Virgil's Aeneid in Greece and Rome to The Canterbury Tales and Gulliver's Travels and Pilgrim's Progress and The Grapes of Wrath and Alice in Wonderland and Treasure Island and and The Lord of the Rings and The Chronicles of Narnia and The Wizard of Oz. To pretty much every James Bond movie that's ever been made!! The theme of the JOURNEY IS EVERYWHERE

And each of these "journey tales" are compelling because of the mixture

- of the known and the unknown
- the risk and the adventure
- the battles and struggles and insights
- and the wins and losses of one kind or another along the way

And so this is will be our over-arching theme this Fall: THE JOURNEY! And we'll cover the ground as we think about

- Traveling Light Looking Round the Corner
- Slowing Down Staying the Course
- Setting Out and Saying Goodbye

And then this morning as we think about

- “A Person Worth Following”

Of course -- the usual name for a person worth following on a journey is “a Guide” a person who has been there before, and knows the road and assesses the risks, and has a sense of responsibility for us and beckons us to keep moving on.

And if we were sheep – we’d definitely need this guide, and we’d call this “guide” “a shepherd.”

Sheep -- Always need a shepherd!! -- Always need to be on the lookout for fresh grass and water and safety: In fact unless there’s a shepherd to keep them moving the sheep will stay in the same place and nibble at the grass all the way down to the roots until they kill it. They have no clue what’s good for them! that what they’re doing is self-destructive (they simply cannot see that far ahead) SO they need a Guide to follow!! A shepherd to lead and nudge them on the right way on the best way to find life

And this is true in all kinds of areas in live that the chances of thriving the likelihood of success in life – is far greater -- no matter what the particular path we’re on if we find -- and stick closely to -- a person worth following. --

Back in the mid-1990s the Big Brother/Big Sister organization conducted a survey to see how effective they were in helping young people: by establishing a relationship w/ an adult friend, somebody who’d traveled the journey of life ahead of them (Of course – in this context, we call the “Guides” not “shepherds” but “mentors”) AND they discovered something remarkable.

That if children were mentored by somebody else -- an adult guide coming into their lives to show them the best path ahead: -- then, compared to a control group they were

- 46% less likely to be using illegal drugs in the days ahead,
- 27% less likely to begin using alcohol,
- 52% less likely to skip school,
- 37% less likely to skip a class, and
- 33% less likely to hit someone.

In other words: The impact of that other life, -- their influence, help, advice -- was simply huge. (<http://evidencebasedprograms.org/1366-2/117-2>).

And this impact: -- the impact of a relationship w/ “someone worth following” carries over to adulthood

Business guru, John Rampton, lists ten reasons why in the business world finding a personal friend, guide or mentor -- someone you know -- and who knows you and who is worth following -- is simply a MUST (he says)

- # 1. They are sounding boards we can bounce ideas off for an unfiltered opinion.
- # 2. They provide information and knowledge.
- # 3. They have the experiences we can learn from to prevent making the mistakes that every beginner make.
- # 4. They are trusted advisers.
- # 5. They find ways to stimulate our personal and professional growth.
- # 6. They can see where we need to improve when we often cannot.
- # 7.They are disciplinarians that create necessary boundaries that we cannot set for ourselves.
- # 8. They can be connectors, linking us with others
- # 9. They offer encouragement and help keep us going.
- # 10. They are free!! Which makes them priceless in more ways than one.

It's a great list – and all of it applies to the spiritual journey as much as to the journey of life in general or the life in business listening, opinions, information, knowledge, experiences, advice, encouragement, stimulation, insight, discipline, boundaries, connections. WE NEED THESE!! And these are what we can find -- if in fact we can find a person worth following a person, for example: like Jesus!!

There is a Christian singer by the name of Bryan Serchio. He's not very well known but some years ago now he wrote a song called "Follow Me 87 Times." A strange title: "Follow Me 87 Times"!!

And the words go like this –

I met this preacher from Australia.
He read the Bible searching for its dominant themes.
And he counted 87 times when Jesus said "Follow me."
Well you know that got me thinking.
Am I following Jesus or just believing in Christ?
87 times? He said "Follow me"?
Am I following Jesus or just believing in Christ?

87 times! In the Bible! In the Four Gospels! Well I heard the song, and I had to fact-check it! He's almost right. What's true, is that on 87 occasions in the Four Gospels you find words or phrases like – following, being a follower, or they followed him.

And 21 of these are explicit commands from Jesus' mouth:

- In which he utters the command: "Follow me!"
- In fact it's the most repeated command of Jesus in the gospels.
- It's present in all 4 of them

And even the most skeptical biblical critic saying that "not all the words of Jesus in the Bible come from Jesus" would be convinced that Jesus said it; and that he said it frequently; and that he said it with power – absolute conviction so that on one-occasion-after-another, when people heard this command, they stopped what they were doing, and -- as the gospel account says (Mark 1:18), "immediately" they followed him.

They followed him!!

This is what Jesus calls people to do: to follow him -- not just believe in him but follow him. Learn from him. Turn to him every day -- as a guide, a friend, a mentor

To be sure, of course, we are called 'to believe' in him. But you can believe and not follow -- and obviously for the Jesus who makes the command 21 times this is not what he has in mind!!

In his lifetime, the tight-rope walker Blondin apparently made the journey across Niagara Falls around 300 times. And on July 15, 1859, with President Fillmore in attendance, he actually did it pushing a wheel-barrow

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-daredevil-of-niagara-falls-110492884/>

What is also told about this occasion (but I cannot confirm) is that -- when he finished crossing he asked if anyone believed he could do it again? (and, of course, everyone said "Yes"!) And then he asked – "Well, if you really believe this: which one of you will climb into the wheel barrow -- and come with me?" (Apparently, there was a stunned silence, and no takers!)

BUT that's what Jesus is asking of us when he says "Follow me!) Not just that we believe in him with our heads, or even our hearts, (tho' this is important that we sort out what we believe). BUT that we believe strongly enough about him with our lives so that we choose him as our guide and friend and mentor BECAUSE we believe he's a person worth following.

Someone, as John Rampton says

- who's been down the path before us
- who promises to lead us truly
- who'll listen as we share our ideas and seek an unfiltered opinion.
- who'll provide information and knowledge and advice that flow from experience
- who'll show us ways to stimulate our growth, where we need to improve
- who'll keep us disciplined and connect us with others
- who'll encourage us to keep on going and will stick with us through thick and thin.

That's what we need – and that's what he offers.

It's in John's Gospel, chapter 10 that Jesus spells it out most clearly "I am the Good Shepherd" -- The Good Guide; the Good Mentor.

¹⁰I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly

¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

¹⁴BUT -- I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

As if to say, I don't want you to follow me because you must or ought, I don't want you to follow me for no good reason. I want you to follow me because I love you and can help you, like no one else! I know exactly what you need/what is best. I can help you find the best life, the best way, the best path! BUT ONLY IF you let me be your shepherd and YOU ACTUALLY FOLLOW ME!

Which is either a claim of arrogance -- or delusion or it's true which, of course, is why those who first heard the command shared what happened to them: they believed this and found it to be true

How do we know that they heard the command and followed?

- Because they remembered the moments when they heard the command!
- and wanted others to share in what they discovered because it was the best decision of their lives

Let me read our passages again

(Matthew 4:18-22; 9:9, 27; 16:24; 20:29-34; and John 10:27; 12:26)

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee; mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

As Jesus and his followers were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" and, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight – and followed him.

Jesus said: My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. Whoever serves me, must follow me. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross -- and follow me.

A person worth following!

Friends: Let's make sure that WE HEAR THIS CALL start out on the journey with Christ -- AND FOLLOW!

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