

## FOLLOW ME

One of the things that separates the Presbyterian Church from other denominations is the way that we govern ourselves. Those of you who come to church from week-to-week may not see it, or even be aware of it, but there is a whole dimension of work for the Kingdom of Jesus Christ that goes on within the PC(USA) beyond these walls. There are other churches that can't say that. Some of you may feel that isn't necessary; I think it's a real strength of the church. There are some here who have worked at the Presbytery level and seen what it does, and I hope that those who have may agree with me.

I've had the privilege to be involved in some of those things that are being done beyond these walls by the wider church. Mostly of worked for the local presbytery, but more recently I'm doing some work for the Synod, which is a regional body, and this summer I've been asked to serve as this presbytery's commissioner to the General Assembly in Salt Lake City.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to go to lunch with one of my colleagues here in the presbytery. I was serving on the Presbytery's Commission on Ministry. That particular commission helps to facilitate the relationships between local churches and their pastors so that the church can focus on doing the work of the Kingdom. The colleague with whom I was meeting was serving as an interim pastor for a local church. Their permanent pastor had occasion to be away from the pulpit for an extended period, and she was filling in during the pastor's absence. I had helped her do some things, so she had invited me to lunch.

During lunch I shared with her some frustrations that I had with the church in general, and she said something that has stuck with me. She said, "You know Tom, the bible never records that Jesus said, 'Worship me!' What Jesus said was, 'Follow me!'. That's a different thing." That got me to thinking. Especially since I read this passage in front of me, where Jesus said, "Follow Me".

Looking back over all the years of my life and my association with the church of Jesus Christ, what I remember most are the people with whom I have worked. For example, last year about this time I went back to First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, where I had previously served as pastor. Even though I haven't seen most of those people in twenty years now, I remembered most of them. In fact, there was only one person there who I couldn't remember. I was amazed that there was only one person I didn't recognize. I was amazed that there was only one person I didn't recognize.

After the people, though, what I remember most are the services of worship. I remember the times where we just sat in worship and had congregational singing. I remember the times where we celebrated Christmas or Ash Wednesday. I remember the times where we had special music or some special presentation by our children. So much of the life of the congregation is bound up in Worship that it's hard not to remember those things.

I think one of the primary reasons that this has become so important to us is that worship speaks to us in a different way than most ways that we think about God. When I deliver a Sunday School lesson or when I deliver a sermon, I'm speaking to a person's intellect. Worship on the other hand is emotional experience. The focus in worship is to move the heart. It's about appealing to the way that a person feels rather than what they think.

After years and years as a pastor, I have come to understand the powerful hold that worship has on us. Those of us raised in the Western World were taught that what separates us from the rest of creation is our ability, as human beings, to reason. What I have discovered is that most of us, really all of us including myself, are far more motivated by our emotions than by our reasons. We are far more likely to make a decision based on how we feel than on any rational basis. More often what we do is choose something based upon how we feel first, then use reason to justify our choices. I'm not saying that's wrong; I'm not saying that's bad; I'm saying that's the way that we are.

Now, lest you think that I'm being critical of the practice of worship, I actually think worship is a good thing. Worship helps us to focus our emotions upon Christ. It gives us a free space to express how we feel about the God who saves us, about the God who forgives us, about the God who calls us to something better. We are commanded by Jesus Christ to love our God with all our heart and soul before we are commanded to love God with our strength and mind. Worship provides us with an avenue to do just that. So, I believe worship is a good thing.

What I wonder, though, is this: what will we be doing after we worship? This afternoon, when we go home, will we simply put God aside for another week? Is this- what we're doing right now here in worship- the only thing that matters to us? Now, I'm asking that question rhetorically, but I think it bears some thinking about.

Well, I can only speak for myself. But to me the mark of a true Christian lies in whether or not they follow. The story we have in John today is about the calling of the disciples. For some reason, the author of John pays particular attention to the calling of Philip and Nathaniel. Notice the pattern. Jesus finds Philip and says, "Follow me". Philip then went to Nathaniel and said, "I found the one that the gospel tells us about." Nathaniel said, "This guy is from Nazareth. How do you know? How can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said, "Come and see." The Disciples found the Messiah, or they were found by him, and then they chose to drop everything and follow, and then they told others who followed.

The early church grew explosively, and they followed this same pattern. This was the method they used. Jesus made disciples who went out and made more disciples who went out and made yet more disciples. It wasn't rocket science, but it worked! The church grew faster at that time than at any other time in history, and it worked for a good long time- several centuries.

I want to point out something. Having discovered the Messiah, the Disciples could have reacted differently. They could have gone off to the Temple or their local synagogue and given

thanks to God. They could have said a prayer for the success of the Messiah's ministry. They could have sung a few praise and worship hymns. They could have chosen to give a few bucks to the Messiah's ministry. They could have spread the rumor that they had seen the messiah. They also could have gone to hear him speak. They could have gone up to him after the sermon was over and said, "I really enjoyed your message, rabbi."

Jesus called his disciples to make a different choice. He called them to follow him. They chose to commit their lives to following Jesus. He called them to build their lives around the new life that Jesus offered in his coming.

My wife Barbara is a retired nurse. I don't know much about healthcare, but one of the things that I do know is that they have a very well-established method for teaching medical procedures. If you've been in healthcare, you may know this method. The method can be described in just a few words, "Watch one, do one, teach one." Simple. Watch one, do one, teach one. That's the way that they teach Doctors and Nurses to operate. Imagine that you went to a doctor who told you, "No, I've never taken out an appendix before, but I have seen every episode of ER and Chicago Hope. You'll be fine." I wouldn't want that doctor to touch me! I want that Doctor to have watched somebody do it, and then tried to do it themselves, and learned it well enough that they can teach somebody else to do it, before I will let them touch me.

Over the years, I have had people ask me about how to grow spiritually. How do I get closer to God? How do I become stronger in my faith and so forth. I'm here to tell you that I don't have an easy answer for that. It seems to me that the big problem that so many people have is they never move beyond the watching stage into the doing and teaching stages.

Most of us try to do that by spending more time in worship or in prayer. Those are not bad things, but they will only take a person so far; inevitably they will lead us to a plateau. We sit in worship or in prayer and try to absorb as much as we can, just like a sponge. We try to read our bible and absorb as much as we can. The thing about sponges, though, is that they will only hold so much liquid. After a certain point, absorbing more will require the sponge to be wrung out so they can absorb more; it will have to give away some of what it already has in order to absorb more. Spiritual growth is no different. At some point the disciple has to give away some of what they have in order to move further. They have to "do one" and they have to "teach one". Discipleship is no different.

Now, I said I didn't have an easy answer for you. It's not easy. It's simple, but it's not easy. At some point our growth is going to require us to give away what we have. Remember what Jesus said, "He who would save his life for the sake of the Kingdom must lose it." We have to be willing to give away some of what we have.

Now, I can't look into anyone else's heart. I don't know how any of you feel about Jesus Christ- unless you tell me. Maybe you're satisfied with the relationship that you have with him, and if you are that's great. However, I often hear dissatisfaction from people about their relationship with Christ. They want to grow closer. They want it to be better. If you're one of

those people who wants more from your faith than you've been getting. If you want a closer, more abiding relationship with Christ, then my advice is don't just worship Christ. Follow him! If you're not sure how to do that, come talk to me. We will sit down and talk about how you can strengthen your relationship with Christ. I will do the best I can to help you. But again, my advice is that if you want that closer relationship, don't just worship Christ, follow him.