

What Does It Mean to Follow?

Psalm 62:5-12 and Mark 1:14-20

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Mark 1: 14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew 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." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.



(Sung)

*"I have decided to follow Jesus,
I have decided to follow Jesus,
I have decided to follow Jesus,
No turning back, no turning back."*

What does it mean to follow Jesus? It means many things, of course. Its meaning is as unique as each person here. No two persons are the same. No two paths of Christian discipleship will be the same either.

But there are common threads that bind our lives together. To follow Jesus involves a choice, a decision to lead one's life in a certain way, in a new way, a way that will be life-giving, life-renewing, life abundant. To follow Jesus involves our behavior. We who follow Jesus try to act in ways we find consistent with the Jesus Way. We try to live a life in keeping with the vision of God which Jesus gave to the world through his life and teachings.

Those of us growing up in the era and locations of Christendom have had a front row seat on the Jesus story. We have gone to church as children, heard the Bible stories at our mother's knees, sung in the children's choir, acted in the yearly Christmas pageant, waved palms at the start of Holy Week and dressed in our Sunday best on Easter. Christianity was the norm for most of us and we never had much occasion to question whether we wanted to follow Jesus.

Today is a new day. We live in a society that is religiously pluralistic. The world is smaller and more complex. Denominational loyalties are largely a thing of the past.

Growing up in a family that is Christian is no longer a guarantee that one will choose to be a Christian.

(Sung)

*“The world behind me, the cross before me,
The world behind me, the cross before me,
The world behind me, the cross before me.
No turning back, no turning back.”*

When my wife Jennifer and I and our children went to India to study at United Theological College in Bangalore, we met a couple named P.B. and Vimala Thomas. P.B. was a Christian for many generations. Christianity is said to have come to India through the evangelization of St. Thomas in the first century after Christ. Vimala, however, was a convert to Christianity. She was born into a Hindu family. When she was a young woman her father got very ill and was near death. The family did everything they could think of to help him. Vimala was told to go to the local Christian church and ask them for prayers of healing for her father. She did this and came to feel welcomed at the church. Fortunately her father recovered. Vimala chose to stay involved with the church and wanted to become a Christian. She decided to follow Jesus. Her family was adamantly opposed to this. Her brother beat her up physically to dissuade her from her decision. She did not relent and was banished from her home. Later, Vimala went to a Bible College where she met P.B., fell in love, and married him. They later came to the United Theological College where we met them.

Vimala’s decision to follow Jesus was life changing for her. She was not part of a Christian family; she did not grow up in a culture where Christianity was taken for granted. For her to choose a Christian life meant great difficulty and sorrow, but the call was not to be ignored or denied. She said “yes” to God whom she recognized in Jesus.

What does it mean for us to follow Jesus? As I said before, this will be a unique journey for each of us. But there are common threads, places of communal intersection and support. We need to tell the story of God’s love. We need to practice the faith. We need to be open to the leading of God’s Spirit.

The calling of the disciples by the Sea of Galilee is a remarkable story about God, but it tells us very little about people. We can only imagine what was going on in the minds of Peter and Andrew, James and John, when they dropped their nets and followed Jesus. The full meaning of their decision to follow Jesus is not clear until much later when they deal with the religious and political authorities in Jerusalem. The real test of their discipleship comes at the cross.

Maybe it is the same with us. We hear the call to live as a disciple and come to discover later the true meaning of this decision. It is easy and comfortable at some point and then, in God’s time, we recognize that this Christian life is real, more real than anything we ever imagined. It will mean that we give over our lives to God so that God can make us new. That is hard for us, especially as we are taught to value our

individuality and personal power. But the message of the gospel is wider, deeper, and broader than personal achievement and success. When we give our lives to God, we do not lose our lives, we find our lives.

(Sung)

“Though none go with me, still I will follow,

“Though none go with me, still I will follow,

“Though none go with me, still I will follow,

No turning back, no turning back.”

What does it mean to follow Jesus? It means finding our lives, taking hold of the love God has for all people, participating in the transformation of creation, walking in the path of peace and justice, meeting and walking with the lover of our souls.

Thanks be to God. Amen.