

"FOLLOW ME"

INTRODUCTION

When a minister has a keynote message in his bones, Homecoming Sunday is surely the time to turn it loose. The Summer is past. It's time to close up the beach cottage. A new season beckons. Anticipation runs high in our fellowship. The Community Room has been redecorated and will be renamed within the next ninety minutes. We look to the year ahead with high hopes and great expectations.

But what can a man say to a troubled church, in a troubled city, in a troubled nation, in a troubled world. Pep rally rhetoric is for the football field of a Fall day on a college campus. Crash programs and the promise of instant cures belong to Madison Avenue and not to MML and J.

~~Thick volumes of social analysis are the province of research fellows who have lucked into a foundation grant. Throwing in the towel is no possibility for those who have been given a towel and commissioned by their Lord to serve their fellow man. What can a man say? He can lift up and commend two words of Jesus that resonate with great relevance for people today: "Follow Me."~~

DEVELOPMENT

Jesus uttered these words not once, but many times: to Peter and Andrew by the Sea of Galilee; to Levi, the son of Alphaeus at the seat of customs. To a balking inquirer the words of Jesus were: "Let the dead bury their dead, and come - follow me!" And to the rich young ruler, He said: "Sell what you have, give to the poor and come - follow me!" And to all in His time and in succeeding times, His words are: "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

To me, these words of command are plain and disconcertingly personal. They cut through a maze of theology and organization. They are no respecter of denominational ties or ecclesiastical hang-ups. They do not bow to rank or privilege or money. They are tall enough and deep enough to guide a church in the most ambiguous and difficult time. "Follow Me" said Jesus then. He says the same today.

There are several considerations that have moved me in recent weeks to a new appreciation of these words.

DIRECTION

First of all, anyone who says "Follow Me" is apparently going somewhere, some place. And we desperately need a sense of direction - in the Church, in the nation, in the world. Perhaps His words strike you as unwelcome and intrusive. They threaten to dislocate us. But ponder them longer and find that part of their appeal lies in the fact that they promise to connect us up with One who is going someplace.

The therapy of hibernation that is being practiced by so many in our time cannot really heal what hurts us deep inside. Yet, leadership that knows where it is going is hard to come by in our society and so we hibernate. I spotted a T-shirt at the beach this Summer in Maine that said, "Don't follow me, I'm lost!"

One of our leaders was criticized recently by a veteran politician who spoke his mind frankly: "I don't take him seriously because I don't think he's going anyplace."

Jesus has a plan, a work to do, a purpose to achieve in history and beyond. And He intends to cut us in. "Follow me" are His words to us today.

FUTURE

Moreover, anyone who says, "Follow Me" is obviously more interested in the future than the past, and we desperately need a loyalty, a commitment to the future. You see, with Jesus, it's not where you have been that matters but where you're going; not whether you've fallen, but whether you will get up; not whom you've hurt in the past, but whom you will help in the future.

A relatively new approach to psychiatry has been abroad for a few years now and it goes under the name of Reality Therapy. It's founding mentor was William Glasser. The approach is appealing and makes good sense (at least to me). Reality therapists insist that it is futile to keep on rummaging around in a man's past, getting people to articulate and amplify yesterday's failures and to recall how the world has mistreated them. The important thing is to get them to face their needs and to prepare for a future worth living.

This approach may err a bit on the side of oversimplification, but I find myself saying "amen" to some of Glasser's statements. For instance,

"Without denying that the patient had an unsatisfactory past, we find that to look for what went wrong does not help him. What good comes from discovering that you are afraid to assert yourself because you had a domineering father? Both patient and therapist can be aware of this historical occurrence; they can discuss it in all of its ramifications for years, but the knowledge will not help the patient assert himself now."

Fan through the pages of the Gospel record and you will be startled to discover how little time Jesus spent allowing people to expand on a burdened past. For instance, when the woman taken in adultery was thrust into His presence, He did not try to explore the circumstances that had pushed her to her fall. He simply took her by the hand and said, "Go thy way and sin no more". When Nicodemus came to Him under the cover of night, shackled by an impossible legalism, Jesus didn't ask him how he got that way, but simply said, "You must be born again".

To me, the Story of the Prodigal Son is the great model of how God deals with men and women who have failed. The younger brother in the far country never got to recite before his father the speech that he had so carefully learned and memorized. Instead, his words were smothered in his father's love. He was given a ring for his finger, a robe for his back, and shoes for his feet and restored to full status as a son. To be penitent is to be forgiven, and to be forgiven is to rise up and follow. Forget the past - come, follow me!

Yes...we might stumble and fall again. We do not move on brashly for our failures are still very much in our mind. But we know that we are being led by light and love. This is what T. W. Manson, the New Testament scholar, was writing about when he said:

"The living Christ still has two hands: one to point the way and the other held out to help us along. So the Christian ideal lies before us, not as a remote and auster mountain peak, an ethical Everest which we must scale by our own skill and endurance; but as a road on which we may walk with Christ as our guide and friend. And we are assured, as we set out on this journey, that He is always with us, 'even unto the end of the world.'"

A NORM Finally, consider the fact that whoever commands us to follow and wins our allegiance has given us a norm, a model, a standard by which to test our living.

Christ does not absorb us, or intend to absorb us. There is a distance between the Lord and the servant, so that our self-hood, our integrity and our individuality might be preserved. Moreover, he calls us not to some detailed imitation, but to follow - each of us in the context of his time, his place, his work - and to be faithful to the Christ spirit. There is no time or place or circumstance where one cannot follow.

What Christian living is all about - singly or corporately - is following Christ, an important thing for us to see at this time in the life of our nation and the Church when we are being prodded by the Living Lord to move along with history.

"Follow me". I believe this is the word that ought to monitor what we do and say and think as Christians - as trustees, as leaders and participants of groups in the Church, as ministers, as laymen. We need to ask: is this action, this decision, this policy, this gesture, this attitude of such a quality that it is moving our church in the direction that He is going. We may not always agree on what it means to follow Jesus, but we cannot question the fundamental presumption that we are here to follow Jesus. This is the acid test stripped of its theological decor. What matters only and always is whether it can be understood as following Christ.

CONCLUSION "Follow Me". To follow Jesus is to have a plan. To follow Jesus is to face and embrace the future with Him. To follow Jesus is to have a star by which to steer our lives. Every time He comes across our path and bids us follow, He creates a crisis. And we can never be the same again. For when that command registers on our souls, we can choose to die to God and live to self, or to die to self and live to God.

An imaginary conversation between Jesus and the angel Gabriel, after the Ascension, describes Gabriel as asking the Master what plan He had made for completing His work of telling everyone about God's love. Jesus answered, "I asked Peter and James and John, and some more of them on earth to follow me and to make it the business of their lives to tell others. And the others are to tell others and the others still others, until every man has heard the message and had his life transformed by it."

Gabriel stood in meditation as though he saw a flaw in the master's plan. He said, "Yes, Master, but suppose after a while Peter forgets and John loses His enthusiasm. And what if their successors, down in the 20th century, get so busy or so timid that they do not have the time or the courage to tell the others. What will you do then?" The Peters and Pauls, the Marys and Marthas..

The voice of Jesus answered quietly and confidently: "I haven't made any other plans. I'm counting on them". "I'm counting on them to 'follow Me'".

PRAYER Father of us all, You have placed upon us the responsibility for carrying forward Your mission. Make us faithful that we may not disappoint Your hopes. If we follow at a distance or not at all; if we follow from a sense of duty that is void of any real passion; if we follow only when it is convenient for us to do so; speak to us now in commanding love. Help us to become what You meant us to be, through Jesus Christ. Amen

PRAYER

Teach us, good Lord, to serve You more faithfully.
To give and not to count the cost.
To fight and not to heed the wounds.
To toil and not to seek for rest.
To labor and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing
that we do thy will.

In the spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen

"FOLLOW ME"

INTRODUCTION

When a minister has a keynote message in his bones, Homecoming Sunday is surely the time to turn it loose. The summer is past. A new season beckons. Anticipation runs high in our fellowship. Sanctuary restoration is complete. We look now to the year ahead.

But what can a man say to a troubled church, in a troubled city, in a troubled nation, in a troubled world. Pep rally rhetoric is for the college campus. Crash programs and the promise of instant cures belong to BBD and O, not to MML and J (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).

Thick volumes of social analysis are the province of research fellows who have lucked into a foundation grant. Throwing in the towel is no possibility for those who have been given a towel and commissioned by their Lord to serve.

What can a man say? He can lift up and commend two words of Jesus that resonate with great relevance for people today: "Follow me".

DEVELOPMENT

Jesus uttered these words not once, but many times: to Peter and Andrew by the Sea of Galilee; to Levi, the son of Alphaeus at the seat of customs. To a balking inquirer the words of Jesus were: "Let the dead bury their dead, and come - follow me!" And to the rich young ruler, He said: "Sell what you have, give to the poor and come - follow me!" And to all in His time and in succeeding times, His words are: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me".

To me, these words of entreaty and command are plain and disconcertingly personal. They cut through a maze of theology and organization. They are no respecter of denominational ties or ecclesiastical hang-ups. They do not bow to rank or privilege or money. They are tall enough and deep enough to guide a church in the most ambiguous and difficult time. "Follow me" said Jesus.

There are several considerations that have moved me in recent weeks to a new appreciation of these words.

DIRECTION

First of all, anyone who says "Follow me" is apparently going someplace - and we desperately need a sense of direction - in the church, in the country, in the world. His words strike us initially as unwelcome and intrusive. They threaten to dislocate us. But ponder them longer and find that part of their appeal lies in the fact that they promise to connect us with one who is going someplace.

The therapy of hibernation that is being practiced by so many in our time cannot really heal what hurts us deep inside. Yet, leadership that knows where it is going is hard to come by in our society; and so, we hibernate. There was more truth than humor to the legend I spotted on a T-shirt at the beach this Summer in Maine: "Don't follow me, I'm lost!"

One of our public leaders was criticized recently by a veteran politician who spoke his mind frankly: "I don't take him seriously because I don't think he's going anyplace".

Jesus has a plan, a work to do, a purpose to achieve in history and beyond. And he intends to cut us in.

"Follow me" are His words to us today.

FUTURE Moreover, anyone who says, "Follow me" is obviously more interested in the future than the past, and we desperately need a loyalty, a commitment to the future. With Jesus, it's not where you have been that matters, but where you're going; not whether you've fallen, but whether you will get up; not whom you've hurt in the past, but whom you will help in the future.

A relatively new approach to psychiatry has been abroad for a few years now and it goes under the name of Reality Therapy. It's founding mentor was William Glasser. The approach is appealing and makes sense to me. Reality therapists insist that it is futile to keep on rummaging around in a man's past, getting people to articulate and amplify yesterday's failures and to recall how the world has mistreated them. The important thing is to get them to face their needs and to prepare for a future worth living.

This approach may err a bit on the side of oversimplification, but I find myself saying "amen" when Glasser writes:

"Without denying that the patient had an unsatisfactory past, we find that to look for what went wrong does not help him. What good comes from discovering that you are afraid to assert yourself because you had a domineering father? Both patient and therapist can be aware of this historical occurrence; they can discuss it in all of its ramifications for years, but the knowledge will not help the patient assert himself now".

Fan through the pages of the Gospel record and you will be startled to discover how little time Jesus spent allowing people to expand on a burdened past. For instance, when the woman taken in adultery was thrust into His presence, He did not try to explore the circumstances that had pushed her to her fall. He simply took her by the hand and said, "Go thy way and sin no more". When Nicodemus came to him under the cover of night, shackled by an impossible legalism, Jesus didn't ask him how he got that way but simply said, "You must be born again".

To me the story of the Prodigal Son is the great model of how God deals with men and women who have failed. The younger brother in the far country never got to recite before his father the speech that he had so carefully learned and memorized. Instead, his words were smothered in his father's love. He was given a ring for his finger, a robe for his back, and shoes for his feet, and restored to full status as a son. To be penitent is to be forgiven, and to be forgiven is to rise up and follow.

Yes, we might fall again. We do not move on brashly for our failures are still very much in our mind. But we know that we are being led by light and by love. This is what the eminent New Testament scholar, T. W. Manson, was writing about when he said:

"The living Christ still has two hands: one to point the way and the other held out to help us along. So the Christian ideal lies before us, not as a remote and austere mountain peak, an ethical Everest which we must scale by our own skill and endurance; but as a road on which we may walk with Christ as guide and friend. And we are assured, as we set out on the journey, that he is with us always, 'even unto the end of the world.'"

A NORM Finally, consider the fact that whoever commands us to follow and wins our allegiance has given us a norm by which to test our living.

Christ does not absorb us, or intend to absorb us. There is a distance between the Lord and the servant, so that our self-hood, our integrity and our individuality might be preserved. Moreover, he calls us not to slavish (slav' ish) imitation, but to follow - each of us in the context of his time, his place, his work. There is no time or place or circumstance where one cannot follow.

What Christian living is all about - singly or corporately - is following Christ, an important thing for us to see at this particular time in the life of our nation and the church when we are being prodded by the living Lord to move along with history.

I believe

"Follow me" - this is the word that ought to monitor what we do and say and think as Christians - as trustees, as leaders of groups in the church, as committee members, as ministers, as laymen. Is this action, this decision, this policy, this gesture, this attitude of such a quality that it is moving our church in the direction that He is going. We may not always agree on what it means to follow Jesus, but we cannot question the fundamental presumption that we are here to follow Jesus. This is the acid test stripped of its theological decor.

It really doesn't matter whether an action is profitable or popular, whether it is practical or realistic, whether it wins a salute from the city, the conference, the nation. What matters only and always is whether it can be understood as following Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION "Follow me". To follow Jesus is to have a plan. To follow Jesus is to face and embrace the future with Him. To follow Jesus is to have a star by which to steer our lives. Every time He comes across our path and bids us follow, he creates a crisis. And we can never be the same again. For when that command registers on our souls, we can choose to die to God and live to self, or to die to self and live to God.

~~The kind of loyalty I should like to command of myself and see this wonderful congregation of people offer up to God flows through this closing illustration.~~ An imaginary conversation between Jesus and the angel Gabriel, after the ascension, describes Gabriel as asking the Master what plan he had made for completing his work of telling everyone about God's love. Jesus answered: "I asked Peter and James and John, and some more of them on earth to make it the business of their life to tell others. And the others are to tell others, and the others still others, until every man has heard the message and had his life transformed by it."

Gabriel stood in meditation as though he saw a flaw in the Master's plan. He said, "Yes, but Master, suppose after a while Peter forgets and John loses his enthusiasm. And what if their successors, down in the 20th century, get so busy or so timid that they do not have the time or the courage to tell the others. What will you do then?"

The voice of Jesus answered quietly and confidently: "I haven't made any other plans. I'm counting on them"..."counting on them to 'follow me'"

PRAYER

O God, our Father, who hast placed upon us the responsibility for carrying forward thy mission, make us faithful that we may not disappoint thy hopes. If we follow at a distance or not at all; if we follow from a sense of duty void of passion; if we follow only when it is convenient for us to do so; speak to us this hour in these moments in commanding love, and help us to become what we were meant to be, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.