

Follow Me

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“And he said to them, ‘Follow me....’” Matt.4:19

“Don’t worry,” I told the funeral director, “I know where the cemetery is.”

I thought I did. It was a small, family cemetery out in the country but right off the main highway about eight miles out of town. I had been there some years before to inter the husband in the family plot. Now I was to officiate at the service for his widow. “Just follow me,” I said.

So we set out, a line of cars driving into the bright sunlight of a summer’s day with our headlights on. As we filed down the highway, I looked into my rearview mirror and thought that there seemed to be an extraordinary number of cars in this procession, all following me. “I hope I know where I’m going,” I said to myself as we drove on. “Now there should be a rock gate on the left, right around this bend in the road.” We drove on, but there was no such gate. “Maybe it’s farther along,” I thought. We drove on and on, and now the road was taking me into less familiar territory. “Surely that rock gate must be here somewhere,” I thought, trying to suppress the mounting sense of panic. “Why are all those cars following me? Why didn’t I let the funeral director lead? Why did I have to say, ‘Follow me’?”

“I guess we passed it,” my wife said helpfully. Gritting my teeth, I sped ahead and then executed a sharp U-turn, noting with growing embarrassment that I was now passing in the opposite direction the funeral procession I had formerly been leading. I was afraid to look at their faces. Some stared at me as if I had completely lost it; others smiled; a few waved. “This is turning out to be a real adventure,” I thought. Finally, the gate came into view, much covered with weeds and brush, almost hidden from the road. As we turned in and the others followed, I said a prayer: “Thank you, Jesus, thank you; please don’t ever let me do this again. Amen.”

It is hard to be a leader nowadays, even of a funeral procession. Politicians know this even as they attempt to ride the tiger of public opinion. But they are hardly alone. Preachers often complain about congregations eating them alive, just as school board members fear late-night phone calls from irate parents, or worse. Managers and coaches of professional sports teams are not the leaders they once were. It is hard to imagine a John McGraw or even a Vince Lombardi putting up with the gold chains and pierced ears of today’s millionaire athletes. You want trouble today? Take responsibility for your community; be a leader; tell someone “Follow me,” and then watch.

Of course, no one knows this better than the real leaders in our society, those who take responsibility for their children, that is, parents; parents whose words are nearly always suspect, who are always out of touch with the “real world,” and whose mere presence, at the wrong place and the wrong time, is simply a huge embarrassment. How do they lead? How do they, for example, become the leaders, the real leaders, which the sacrament of baptism envisions, that is, parents who will teach their children what is more important than watching television, who will pray with and for their children, and who will be brave enough to say to them in the matter of faith, “Follow me,” when to say that pits them against the culture? For surely, it will not be long

before the child asks if her parents know where they are going, even if they are lost. And it may even be a shorter time before the parents ask themselves, or maybe even God, why someone else wasn't picked for this job, why did they ever say, "Follow me."

Among other pictures of Jesus in the New Testament is one of him as a leader. Perhaps we don't think of him in that way so much, in part because we have been trained to think of him as a nice guy, someone who is always doing something self-sacrificial, reconciling unhappy parties, and generally fixing things up and making people feel better about themselves. But clearly, the disciples, the Pharisees, the crowds, even the Romans saw Jesus as a leader, and a dangerous one at that, one quite capable of taking over the whole country. There would have hardly been a reason to crucify "a nice guy." Gentle Jesus meek and mild would have offended no one. But this Jesus offended many, and others he convinced to leave what they were doing and follow him. This Jesus attracted crowds.

What was his secret? In the 1920s Bruce Barton, an advertising executive, wrote a book entitled, *The Man Nobody Knows*,¹ in which he argued that Jesus was an organizational genius, a businessman who put together the most successful corporation in the history of the world. Jesus was an achiever, a go-getter, a virtuoso whose managerial skills could be profitably made use of today. That, of course, was Barton's great discovery: that Jesus could be made useful; that the faith could be made relevant; that the gospel could, in some measure, pay off. And that is the compliment we often still pay Jesus: we think his gospel potentially useful for our own salvation.

The problem is that Jesus keeps letting us down. The one who says so confidently, "Follow me," winds up on the cross, hardly a place which seems particularly useful to us. The disturbing fact about the gospel story is how persistently irrelevant Jesus insists on being, refusing, as he does, the opportunity to turn stones into bread or lead a war of liberation or demonstrate his own religious virtuosity.

The fact is, Jesus does not assimilate well to our notion of what leadership is about. We can take some comfort in the fact that he did no better in the disciples' eyes. They too were always telling Jesus how real messiahs ought to behave, and they too were often brought up short by his persistent talk of the cross.

"Repent," he says, "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Jesus begins his ministry by inviting us to lay aside our usefulness and follow him. And, of course, it is our usefulness, our competence, which is the hardest thing for us to give up. It is embarrassing to be leading a procession and to be discovered not knowing where the cemetery is. On such occasions, one is exposed, and yet, I suspect, also strangely empowered, empowered to share in a humanity we spend most of our time trying to evade, a humanity whose lostness scares us a bit.

Walter Wangerin tells in one of his stories how he learned to be a pastor. In the second year of his ministry, the church organist, Joselyn Fields, fell ill with cancer. She was forty-seven years old. Every day Wangerin would visit. Every day.

Well, I didn't know what to say, nor did I understand what I had the *right* to say. I wore out the psalms. Psalms were safe. I prayed often that the Lord's will be done, scared to tell either him or Joselyn what the Lord's will ought to be, and scared of his will anyway. I bumbled.

One day, when she awoke from surgery, I determined to be cheerful, to enliven her and to avoid the specter that unsettled me—the death. I

chattered. I spoke brightly of the sunlight outside, and vigorously of the tennis I had played that morning, sweetly of the flowers, hopefully of the day when she would sit at the organ, reading music during my sermon....

But Joselyn rolled a black eye my way. She raised one bony finger to my face. And she said, "Shut up."

God help me! I learned so slowly. But God in Joselyn taught me with unutterable patience. I, who had thought to give her the world she did not have, was in fact taking away the only world she *did* have. I had been canceling her serious, noble, faithful and dignified dance with death.

I shut up. And I learned....

And then autumn whitened into winter and Joselyn became no more than bones.... And the day came when I had nothing, absolutely nothing to say to Joselyn.... I entered her room at noon, saying nothing. I sat beside her through the afternoon, until the sun had slanted into darkness, saying nothing.... The evening took us, and no artificial light went on when the sun went out; but with the evening came the Holy Spirit. For the words I finally said were not my own.

I turned to my Joselyn. I opened my mouth and spoke as a Pastor.... I said, "I love you." And Joselyn widened her ebony eye. And that lady, she put out her arms... She hugged me... She whispered, "I love you too."

And that was all we said. But that... was power from on high, cloaking us both in astonished simplicity, even as Jesus said it would.

And she died. And I did not grieve.²

So do we learn to say "Follow me"—not through our competence but through the cross. To touch another heart at such a moment, what is needed is not bread or religious virtuosity or political power but a faith willing to follow Jesus into the lostness of a terminal illness or bear the irrelevance of being rendered entirely useless by death itself.

"So his fame spread through all Syria and they brought to him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases, epileptics, paralytics, and he healed them...." Folks with trouble, folks who were deemed irrelevant, those folks recognized in Jesus a soulmate. In this respect they were far ahead of the disciples whom he had just called—the last are always the first—because the sick and infirm knew already a good deal about being last, about being rendered useless, whereas the disciples, competent as they were, still had that to unlearn. Those who had just left their nets on this day, however, would, on another day, hear a cock crow and then discover a "lastness" which only an Easter could heal.

It is a hard lesson. But a happy one, I think. That is why Jesus begins by telling us to repent. What he has in mind is not long faces and works of obligation but something quite different. He wants us to repent of our sadness, even our seriousness. "Repent, lest you miss the banquet; make a U-turn so you do not pass up this party. The kingdom of heaven is not far away but near at hand. Here. Now."

Which is why Peter and Andrew, James and John are willing to leave the one thing they know how to do and to follow him. We hear nothing of their great sacrifice, only of this remarkable adventure which has dropped into their laps.

Ralph Wood tells of his pastor, Warren Carr, that he never spoke of any “surrendering to preach” and, in fact, hated such words because he thought they implied that being a Christian leader meant giving up a higher and better life for something shabbier and less worthy. To speak that way, Carr thought, was to act as if one’s heart were set on a really interesting career which had to be surrendered for the dull work of the gospel. In fact, it is the opposite. Once he sensed that he was included in Jesus’ words “Follow me,” Carr “chased after God as hard as he could, plucking at his sleeve and asking for the honor of a calling so splendid, and one so unlikely for a sinner like himself.”³

So do we hear, and learn to say, “Follow me.” It is an adventure, as anyone knows who has ever undertaken this pilgrimage, and there will be times, are times, when we will seem utterly lost, just as there will be times, are times, happy times, when we are given a child to love, a child who looks to his parents and to his parents in the faith, seeking some direction. It is a fearsome thing to say to that child not just “Follow him; he’s a good example,” but rather, “Follow me. Follow me into his body, the church; follow me into his life among the last and least and lost. Follow me.” After all, look who’s talking—but that is what we are invited to say. Believe me, there are plenty of other voices in our culture who are only too happy to say those same words to him, but in the name of quite another god. If our fear of getting lost or even moving into unfamiliar territory is so great that we cannot risk saying “Follow me,” then perhaps our usefulness has become our greatest enemy, and we must pray God for repentance indeed. For saying “Follow me” is *ours* to say, what we as a church must be happy to say, most especially to our own children and to others—not because we are so competent or so good at finding our way, but because there is One who refuses to lose us, who finds us even in our lostness, and who says to us, “Follow me.” Follow me. Amen.

Notes

¹ Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (Bobbs-Merrill. Indianapolis, 1925)

² Walter Wangerin, *Ragman and Other Cries of Faith* (Harper and Row. San Francisco, 1984), 62-64

³ Ralph Wood, “First in Sin, First in Service,” *The Christian Century* 112 No. 25 (August 30-September 6, 1995). 811