

## **“WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW JESUS”**

*Matthew 10:24-39*

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Perpetua was a second-century young woman of some wealth from Carthage, North Africa, who, at the age of 22, became a Christian martyr along with Felicity, her servant. Though nothing is known of her husband, it is known that Perpetua had a newborn son and a devoted father when she and Felicity, along with several male companions, were imprisoned for defying the prohibition against conversion to Christianity. When she was brought to trial for her crime of Christian faith, the authorities urged Perpetua to reconsider her faith decision out of care for her aging father and her child. Perpetua's response to the court was the clear and simple declaration, "I am a Christian." It was not that Perpetua had lost a mother's love for her child, but rather she understood that the prospect of dying for Christ was part of the cost of her discipleship. As for her father, she was saddened by the fact that his lack of faith in Christ Jesus did not allow him to understand her decision.

When Perpetua and Felicity were arrested for their crime of having become Christians, Felicity was eight months pregnant. She suffered not for herself but at the thought that the baby in her womb would be afflicted. After a night of prayer, however, she gave birth to a daughter, and like Perpetua, was able to leave her child in the hands of Christian friends.

Perpetua and Felicity were sentenced to the horrible fate of fighting wild animals in the amphitheater. Church history records that they were taken into the amphitheater and forced to remove their clothing, a shocking moment for the spectators, who could then see that they were very young women. They were allowed to cover their bodies as a savage cow was released into the amphitheater with them. Though speared by the horns of the cow and thrown about, they survived this phase of their ordeal. Finally, a swordsman was ordered to behead them.

Perpetua and Felicity could have denied their faith in Jesus. Immediately before being taken into the amphitheater they were given that opportunity. But Perpetua, speaking for both, is recorded to have said, "For this cause came we willingly to this, that our liberty might not be obscured. For this cause have we devoted our lives."<sup>(1)</sup>

Perpetua and Felicity represent Christians of every generation who, having known the love of God through Christ Jesus, have thus lived and died with the full trust and confidence that they are not alone, for God, who has acted decisively in Christ Jesus to save the world, is with us. Their story became a word of encouragement to other Christians that faith sustains us in the midst of persecution and even cruel death.

Why do I share this story with you today? Don't we see and hear and read enough in the

news that is unpleasant without having to go back to a second century story that makes us uncomfortable, perhaps even repulsed. Yet as we hear about Perpetua and Felicity, we cannot help but ask ourselves the question, what would I have done had I been in their shoes: charged with the crime of following Jesus.

First of all, as a camp counselor once asked me, and I have never forgotten it, “If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” What makes our lives different from those of non-believers?

Then, no doubt, we would debate whether for the sake of our children, we should keep our faith secret, so that we would not run the risk of losing our lives and the role of parenting that God has given to those of us who have been blessed with children. That debate is certainly worth a conversation.

Finally, would we have the courage, do we have the depth of commitment to give our selves, our very lives for the religion we claim to believe? Or when the thought of being attacked by a savage cow or being beheaded looms ahead of us, would we not be quite as committed to our faith as were these young women?

For some, this story is far too gruesome and unpleasant, and, you may be convinced, inappropriate for a Sunday morning sermon. I debated whether or not to share it. But it is simply a page out of church history, one page in a thick volume of stories, many much more gruesome and repulsive than this, that took place time and time again across the early centuries of the life of the church. We who sit in comfortable seats in a well lit and beautiful worship space sometimes forget that it has not always been so for the people of God. It is not always so in some parts of the world today. Just this past week we received reports that the churches are being closed in China as preparations for the Olympics intensifies in that country. In many parts of the world, not only are folks not permitted to practice Christianity, they are persecuted for doing so.

In North America, we have somehow got the idea that one can follow Jesus without getting hurt. Being a Christian is roughly synonymous with being a nice person. Jesus is the one who confirms our highest and best values and institutions. Today’s text reminds us that our assumptions are not always correct. And so I ask you this morning, what does it mean to follow Jesus in our day and in our situation?

I am assuming that by “following Jesus” we mean making a wholehearted commitment to embrace his lifestyle and to put him first in our daily lives. You see, I assume that when people come to this altar and join the church they are making a commitment much like marriage, much like joining a sports team or a music group or anything else we agree to be part of. When you get married, you don’t agree to a part-time commitment. Rather it is for better or worse, richer or poorer, sickness and health, till death do us part. When you join a sports team, you don’t agree just to come to practice on certain days of the week or to play just when the weather is nice. You make a commitment to wear the uniform, show up at every practice and be there for every game. The same is true with regards to music groups. You are expected at every rehearsal, at every concert. That’s what it means to be part of the team.

To those who want to follow Jesus but not take the chance of getting hurt in the process, I ask, is it possible to love anybody or commit to any organization without the risk of getting hurt? Love means making yourself vulnerable. Commitment implies a total life investment. Investments always have a risk factor. Anytime we commit ourselves to anyone or anything we run the risk of getting hurt.

This morning's Gospel lesson talks about the difficult consequences of discipleship. Jesus has already extolled the value of living a virtuous life. Now he reminds the disciples, and us, that there may be some rough days ahead. This past Tuesday night at Lakeside, the elders were ordained, and among them, our Associate Pastor, the Rev. Mark Steiger. Many of our congregation were present to witness that event. It was a holy moment for Mark and for all of us. The bishop asked that when each person knelt to be ordained, family members and friends stand in support of their loved one. Ordination marks a change in life for the one being ordained. But for each person standing, and family members and friends of the ordinand everywhere, ordination marks a change for us, too! In the United Methodist Church, in any church, making a commitment to be a pastor and to follow where God leads involves not only the person upon whom the bishop lays hands, it has consequences for the family and friends as well.

In the early church, the converts understood that being a Christian meant becoming part of Christ's family. They clearly understood that becoming part of Christ's family could cause tension, possibly division within one's current family. It is true every time a person makes the decision to follow Jesus, even today. I believe that's what is behind these difficult verses about Jesus bringing not peace but a sword. This passage from Matthew has been used as a justification by some to do violence in Jesus' name. Yet closer examination suggests that Jesus is not advocating violence at all, but simply stating an obvious reality: that his message is radical and controversial to the point where it will cause deep division, even within families. Have you ever experienced pain or division or anguish on account of the message of Jesus? Has it ever put distance between you and the people you love?

Jesus is saying that following him involves life choices. Making the choice to be a disciple — to join the family that Jesus has created, made up of those who are seeking and doing God's will — may well cause division within one's current family. This is part of the risk involved, epitomized by the statement that we must dare to risk even crucifixion if we are to be true to the Gospel. Carrying one's cross is a powerful symbol of the risk involved in following Jesus. Are we willing to go all the way?

Life is filled with choices. Sometimes the choices are easy and logical. At other times we struggle, and still we are not sure we have made the right decision. Once in a while we wake up and sense that we have gotten on the wrong track completely.

Harold was looking for financial rewards in life. With a two-year college degree, he began working in a bank. He had a great aptitude both for financial management and interpersonal relations. He quickly moved up the ladder and became president of a bank branch in his early 30's. Necessary accouterments came along with the job — a large house, fancy cars, expensive clothing. Eventually the monetary rewards weren't enough, and Harold had an affair that cost him his marriage. He married "the other woman," and that went well, for a while. But eventually that wasn't enough either, and that marriage failed, too. Still, Harold was living large. That came to a crashing halt when he was charged and convicted of embezzling money from his bank, and was sent to prison. In his relentless attempt to find life, he lost his wife and family, his second wife, his career, and finally, his freedom.

Jesus contrasts many things in today's Gospel. He talks about disciple and teacher, slave and master, covered and uncovered, secret and becoming known, dark and light, soul and body, people and sparrows, acknowledging and denying, peace and a sword, finding and losing, losing and finding.

It was German theologian Jurgen Moltmann who lifted up what he called "*the revelation*

*of the opposite.*” (2) Moltmann perceived that God often reveals God’s own self in a way that seems contrary to the end result. Thus, power is revealed in weakness, life is revealed in death. Jesus is never more powerful than when he is giving up his life, dying on a cross.

We may never be confronted with the choices that Perpetua and Felicity were forced to make. Following Jesus will probably not cost us our lives. But every day we have decisions to make, and the choices we make either move us closer to God or further away from him. The results of the choices, over time, are dramatic in their results, as Jesus makes abundantly clear. Every choice costs us something; there is no way to avoid it.

Only when we choose to follow Jesus do we discover life in all its fullness. Only when we choose his way do we find the fulfillment and the joy that we seek. With those who have made the choices through the years, I can say without reservation that the decision to follow Jesus is the choice that leads to peace of mind and to the abundant life

Even though I made the decision to follow Jesus when I was ten years old, I do not believe that conversion is a one time experience. Every day — many times a day — I have to decide whether or not I will follow Jesus. Some of those decisions are easy and clear cut. Others are difficult and costly. But I am convinced that it is in losing ourselves for the sake of the Gospel that we really find true life in all its abundance. I pray that God will continue to help me to make the right decisions, and that God will forgive me when I don’t.

I pray that you will make the right decisions, too. I hope that you will follow Jesus, no matter what the consequences, no matter what the cost.

*Prayer:* Dear God, sometimes it makes so much sense to follow Jesus, and it seems so logical. Other times we wrestle with choices and have sleepless nights, and still the decision is not clear to us. Help us to sense the claim of the Gospel upon our lives. Then help us to follow Jesus in all that we do. In his name we pray. Amen.

Notes:

1. Carcano, Minerva. *I Believe in Jesus*. New York: General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church Mission Resource Center, 2008., pp. 15-18.
2. Quoted in *The Clergy Journal*, Vol. 83., No. 7., p. 123.