

## *Walking With Jesus*

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

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Mark 8:34-35

*“ If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ”*

### *Movement 1 – Why Are We Here?*

Why are you here? Why are you sitting in the pew? Why do you drag yourself out of bed in the morning? Why are you here? It is a question of self-reflection, it is a question of curiosity, and it is a question of critical thinking. Maybe you are pondering in your own mind your presence here, and think back to memories of your parents taking you to church. Maybe your parents still drag you to church, and you are here out of family obligation. Maybe you have been going to church so much that it has become routine for you, and you can't see yourself doing anything else. Why are you here?

This is an important question that we need to ask ourselves every now and again. Not just of our church but of our lives. We need to ask why this school, why this neighborhood, why this church, why this job, and why this lifestyle. It is an existential question that causes you to step back from your life for a moment and question the purpose and drive of your life. Maybe you have never made that kierkegaardian “either/or” decision and you realize that your whole life has been spent flowing from one trend to another. Or maybe you realize that the decisions you have made were based upon a completely different set of ideas and morals that you have today. Why are you here?

Imagine that you are with the crowd walking with Jesus. You are in the desert, in the wilderness and you begin to wonder why you are here. A great crowd has been growing around Jesus for some time, his popularity has been growing and growing, and you think there must be something good about this movement if all of these people are here. Yet you still wonder why you are here? It is hot, you have work to do at home, and right now this crowd seems to be going nowhere. You turn to others, and ask them why they you here? Why sit on the pews or the rocks, why drag yourself out of bed early in the morning to hear about and listen to Jesus? Why are you here?

### *Movement 2 – Remember the Cross*

Remember what Jesus has done. Just as you voice your anxiety, just as your sighs become more and more audible and voice your question with a tone of frustration, someone leans over to you and whispers in a harsh and critical tone, “remember what Jesus has done.” With a sense of embarrassment you remember how Jesus has at least twice feed you and thousands of others with a miracle of multiplication with the loaves and the fish. You remember how Jesus has healed the sick, brought sight to the blind, and made the lame to walk. You remember how Jesus put the religious authorities in their place with truthful and biting criticisms. You remember that you are here because of the person and the personality of Jesus. There is something powerful, magnetic and transfixing about Jesus that draws you to him. You just had to remember.

We all need to remember so that we can answer the why. It is like climbing a mountain. When we are climbing up a mountain, when our lungs are burning for air, when our legs are aching and screaming with pain, and we are asking ourselves, why we

are going through this torture, we need to remember the summit. Remember that beauty at the top of the earth, remember the power and peace you felt in such breathtaking isolation, and remember how you felt as if you were touching God's glory in such a place. We remember the summit, the anticipation gives us a new excitement, and our legs again move, our strength returns (a bit), and our pace continues. There is a reason we climb, and we just need to remember why.

When couples are in a difficult point in their relationship, often I ask, what was it that attracted the two of you to each other? I ask them to remember why it is that they are together, because when the road is rocky it is often easy to forget. In the Italian classic movie *Cinema Paradiso* the main character, a famous movie director, returned home for the funeral of his mentor. As he spent time in his home town, his thoughts returned to his boyhood, his experiences and all that he learned. Being at home, he remembered why it was that he became a famous film director. He reminisced about his mentor who taught him about film, he remembered his lost love, and remember why he chose the life he lives. We need to remember so we can answer the why.

Now let me ask you again, why are you here? Why are you here in the church and why are you here following Jesus? Why are you here? Maybe it is because this is a family church. Maybe it is because you have always felt comfortable in a worship setting. Maybe you're here because you have been brought to church so much that you can't imagine being anywhere else. Or maybe because you remember Jesus who draws you here. Maybe you remember the amazing things that Jesus did. Maybe you read the gospels, and you were captured by his words of love, of mercy and of peace. Maybe you imagined the miracles performed by Jesus and you found yourself swept up into this timeless following of Jesus. You have looked at the cross, and realized the profound power of God's love through Jesus Christ. You had that moment when you read through the gospel, when you realized that this Jesus is God incarnate, and you fell on your knees crying out, "I'm not worthy." You had that moment when you thought about your own life, your failings and shortcomings, your temper and jealousy, your criticism and judgments, your selfishness and your greed and you cry out, "I'm not worthy." How can we be worthy of such love, of such peace and of such grace when we again and again turn from Christ's arms and into the arms of the world? Yet then, at that moment you looked at the cross, and you realized that no matter what we do, no matter how much we turn from Christ, no matter how far we go, even if it is to the point of death, Christ will still love us, Christ will still forgive us, and Christ will still call us into his open arms of grace. Why are you here? If you have made the commitment to Christ, then remember that commitment. Remember that point when you looked at the cross and you realized that you are indeed loved, that you are indeed forgiven and you are blessed. Remember that moment when you entered into the baptismal waters and came up a new person, forgiven and redeemed by Christ. Remember Christ, remember what Christ has done and remember why you are here. Capture again that grace and that glory, go home again to Jesus and rejoice because you are redeemed and you are saved through the love and forgiveness of God. Remember what Jesus did.

### *Movement 3 – Now What?*

We remember, we get excited, but now what? Put yourself back with the crowd. Put yourself back on that rock in the wilderness and look again at Jesus. Right now he is

talking to his disciples. We can't hear what he is saying, but Peter is looking excited. Peter is looking concerned and the rest of the disciples are very interested in that conversation. For a moment, we, the crowd, are left out of the conversation, and we wonder, what now. Like a preschool class, our attention is easily lost. This Jesus person is exciting, the grace and love we receive are powerful, but where do we go from here? What do we do next? Now what should we do, because it feels like we are just meandering from rock to rock, from small town to small town, and we are making little to no progress. There are a group of people behind you who you recognize as zealots, as rebels and revolutionaries. These are people who are always looking for an opportunity to overthrow Rome, and reclaim the independence of Israel. They have been following Jesus because he has been offering some kind of hope and promise that things might change with him. Yet here they are in the wilderness, and these zealots are wondering, what to do next. Shouldn't we train, and plan for the great overthrow? Maybe others in the crowd are also starting to get restless. Maybe they are fidgeting in their seats waiting for another miracle, another great teaching, or some other fantastic act to wow them all and they see nothing. So they are also asking, now what.

In the 1730s, there were a number of "awakenings" in New England. People were swooning and swaying with the Holy Spirit. Individuals were brought to tears, lives were changed and the Spirit was moving. One of the major preachers in this time was the great Jonathan Edwards. He preached sermons of grace, of responsibility and of the love of God. He encouraged these awakenings, yet at the same time, he wondered, "now what." He wondered what the convert should do after saying, "yes" to Christ. He wondered how the convert should live, and how life should change. People were experiencing an amazing spiritual change, and then returning to their normal life routines, and that didn't settle well with Edwards.

We need to ask the same question. Now what? Do we just try to capture that initial experience of redemption again and again? Are we to look to be baptized again and again and consider that the life of the Christian? Is that how we follow Jesus, or is there something more.

It is like buying a bike. We can go to the store, and buy a bike-in-a-box and say we did indeed buy a bike. Late that night, we can open the box, and let all of the pieces fall to the ground, and then stand above them, asking, "Now what?" If we don't put the bike together, will we still have a bike? Now what?

We have given our lives to Christ, we have followed Christ to the wilderness, we have decided to be with Jesus, but now what? Now that we have been redeemed, what do we do?

#### *Movement 4 – The Command of Jesus*

Then Jesus turns to us and speaks. Just as the crowd is beginning to lose focus, just as people are beginning to fidget more and more in their seats, Christ turns and speaks. He speaks to the crowd with words of conviction, words of power and words of weight. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Now Christ is raising the bar and upping the ante. If we were listening in on Jesus' conversation with the disciples we would hear Jesus asking them about his own identity. We would hear Jesus

say, “who do you say that I am,” and Peter then stating the truth, “You are the messiah.” This is a turning point in Jesus’ ministry, because now he is living into his own identity, Jesus is naming and claiming to be the messiah. We would then hear Jesus talk about his death and his glory, and we would have heard Peter deny such a prediction, and witness Jesus put Peter in his place. Then Jesus turns to the crowd. Everything is now on the line. Jesus has shown all of his cards, and he again offers the invitation to follow, yet with the stakes much higher. “Imitate me” Jesus says. “Be like me,” Jesus invites. Yet Jesus does not just say be like me the healer. Or be like me the teacher. No, Jesus does not invite people to be like the popular miracle worker or charismatic personality.

Instead, Jesus says, be like me, the messiah who is going to Jerusalem to die and rise again.

Jesus says be like me, the one who lives a full life as God desires.

Be like me, the one who says “No” to the ways of the world, to the life of the world, and “Yes” to the life of the divine.

Be like me, the one who would die for my enemies.

Be like me, the one who crosses boundaries, the one who does what no one else would do, and the one who loves those that the world will not love.

Jesus tells us what to do next, and it is no simple or easy feat. It is not to go and pay alms to the temple. It is not to go and worship for one hour a week for the rest of our lives (if we can make it). It is not to find a way to make our Christianity comfortable, but to follow Christ through the passion and the suffering. We are given the examples of Adnoriam Judson who went to Burma in order to be like Christ. We are given the example of John Facwett who gave up a comfortable position to continue to follow Christ (and penned the hymn, *Blest Be the Tie that Binds*). We are given the example of Rauschenbusch who worked at a church in Hell’s Kitchen. We are given the example of Christ.

It is like we are interns in an office, and we are to just shadow our teacher. Follow the teacher in every step, every manner and every way. Thomas A’ Kempis wrote the great work, *The Imitation of Christ* which is just as it sounds – the imitation of Christ. Kempis took seriously this call and challenge that Christ offers, and looked at as many aspects of life as possible and how living as an imitation of Christ could occur. C.S. Lewis, called us to be “little Christs” in his work *Mere Christianity* (thanks to Joe Modica’s sermon for this note). What do you want to do next? What do we do after we feel that power and that wash of the Holy Spirit? We imitate Christ, we follow Christ, and we give up our lives and live like Christ. Jesus turns to us and offers us the next step to following him.

#### *Movement 5 – Learning the Language*

We have to learn a whole new way to live. We have to learn a whole new way to speak, to act and even to think. We have to learn a whole new way to live. Jesus calls us to give up our old life and take on a new life, and that is what we strive to do. Yet we must start slow. We must start with the simple words, the simple phrases, and the simple actions. When you are learning a new language, you don’t jump right into conversation, but start with the basic words and ideas. This is what we need to do when we are walking with Jesus. We are to start with the basic words and actions. Like I suggested last week, start with learning Jesus’ story. Listen again and again to his teachings; listen again and

again to his parables. Watch closely to the way he heals people, watch closely to the way he interacts with people, and watch closely to the way people interact with him. Notice when Jesus rebukes the disciples and when he lifts them up. Learn Jesus' story. Yet remember that we cannot just stop with Jesus' story, for the story of Christ is connected with the story of Israel and the story of the Church today. So learn the whole story. Learn the story of the prophets and the apostles. Learn the stories of the kings and the disciples. Learn the whole story of God. Once you learn the story, you can begin to live into the story. You will begin to notice the nuanced ways of speaking. You will learn the way to speak truth to power that disarms power itself. You will learn the way to offer love to the outcaste that is neither condemning nor patronizing. You will learn the way to pray to God that is authentic and humble. You will learn the way to speak out of the story of God the creator, Christ the redeemer and the Holy Spirit the sustainer.

Imagine that you don't know the story of Jesus at all, and you are asked by a person on the corner if you are "saved."

"Saved from what?"

"From the eternal pit of hell."

"What is hell, and why am I going there?"

"Because you are a sinner."

"Says who, and what does 'sin' mean?"

Do you see the problem with the conversation? One person is assuming that the other knows and understands a certain language of Christianity. And I contend that more of us than would like to admit do not truly understand these terms, these ideas, and this language. We can be fed definitions, but if we don't know the whole story then the ideas lose their context. We need to learn the story and speak from the story to be able to say with conviction, "I am saved." Or that in Christ, "I have life." We need to learn it as a church and as a part of this eternal following of Jesus. The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, claimed that language, within the context of a community, has very specific meaning. But if you don't understand the language or if you cannot speak the language, then you will not be able to connect to the meaning held by the community. This is why we need to learn the story.

Walk with Jesus, imitate Jesus, learn the language of Jesus, but not just in reading. We don't just read the story of Christ; we live the story of Christ. We live it in our prayers, so spend time praying. We live the story in our service. When we serve the poor, we are extending the hand of Christ, and continuing to spread the good news of the Kingdom of God. When we serve the homeless, the widows, the orphans and the oppressed we are continuing to experience the good news of the messiah that the blind shall see, the lame shall walk and the captives shall go free. We are living the story of Christ that connects to Micah 6:8 which compels us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God. Live the story, live the language as you walk with Jesus. Start with the small sentences if you need to. Crawl if you need to, but today, say "Yes, Jesus, I will walk with thee." Say, "Yes, Jesus, I will live a new life with you. This is my challenge to you this year. I am challenging you to look at everything you do, and ask yourself if it fits within the life of Christ. If you are on a church board, is that position a way that you walk with Christ? When you go to work, school, or wherever, ask yourself if you are living into the life that Christ calls you to live. Is our church living into the story of Christ? Are you living into the story of Christ? Do you know the story of Christ? Take time learning

that story. Take time studying that story, and then you will be able to speak it and live it with a fluency that will transcend the world.

*Movement 6 – Living Christ's Life*

When you learn this story, and when you live this story you will truly live. Nothing can hold you back when you are walking with Christ. Nothing can bring you down when you are walking with Christ. Oh there may be times of trouble. There may be times of sorrow and times of hardship. There may be times when you say, Christ I can't do this any more, and Christ will bring you the cross. Stay with Christ, don't deny Christ and he will see you through the storm to the other side. No, nothing will separate you from the life and the salvation you will be living when you are walking with Jesus. Not height, nor depth, nor powers nor principalities, nor angels nor demons, nor life or death itself will keep you from Christ. You may stick out in the world, the church may stick out in the world, but that will be because we will not longer be walking with the ways of the world, we will be walking with Jesus. And then people will ask you why you are here. People will want to know why you give your time and your energy to a pie-in-the-sky idea and a hope which cannot be shown. And all you will be able to do is smile because they won't understand. Until you walk with Christ from those baptism waters to the table of redemption to the cross of glory, you won't understand why it is we gather together to share of Christ blessings. But when you do, then the joy will overwhelm you and the grace will surround you. Say yes to Christ. Walk with Christ, and Christ will walk with you.

AMEN