

Following Jesus

Luke 4:16-21

Mitchell Presbyterian Church, Mitchell, IN

Acts 2:42-47

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I'd like for you to think we me this morning about what it means to be a Christian. We use the word all the time, but it's not clear what we mean. There are all kinds of churches that call themselves Christian. And there are all kinds of people in those churches. And there are people who seldom or never go to church, but still call themselves Christian.

Some years ago I was teaching a Commissioning Class – what you probably call a Confirmation Class – and I wanted to get the young people to think about this question of what it means to be a Christian. So one evening I put this question to them: “If it were illegal to be a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” In some ways it is a silly question, because the answer would depend on how the law was written, and what was considered to be the evidence for Christianity. Most of the young people really did not know how to answer the question, though I know of at least one on whom it left a real impression. I'm not sure I know how to answer the question. But that's the point: We are not very clear in our own minds about what it means to be a Christian.

One way to answer the question would be to say that a Christian is someone who belongs to and worships in a Christian church. But you know what the great Evangelist, Billy Sunday, said? “Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile.” That's probably putting it too crudely, but there is this problem of trying to identify the substance, not just the form, or the meat and potatoes, not just the trimmings, that identify a person as a Christian. Going through the motions is not enough.

So here's my shot at trying to answer the question, “What does it mean to be a Christian?”

First, to be a Christian is to regard the person of Jesus of Nazareth as someone who shows us the heart of God, and also shows us something of what it means to be human at our best. Traditional theology talks a lot about Jesus in doctrinal terms. It seems to me that what really matters, however, is the practical role that Jesus has had and can continue to have in our lives as someone who shows us the way – the way to God, and the way to our true humanity. And by the way, if you know the Book of Acts, you know that the first reported term given to the movement of the early followers of Jesus was the Way (Acts 9:2). Only somewhat later were they first called Christians (Acts 11:26).

Over a century ago a man by the name of Charles Sheldon tried to answer this question by writing a book that became very famous. The book is titled *In His Steps*. Maybe some of you have read it. It is one of the best-selling books in American history. In this book Sheldon imagines a town of people who decide to get serious about living their lives in a Christian way. They decide that the clearest and the best way to think about what that means is to always be asking themselves,

“What would Jesus do?” So they pledge themselves to live for one year as Jesus would live, with the end result that the town is transformed.

“What would Jesus do?” I’m sure you’ve heard that question before. It became very popular again about 10 or 15 years ago, and people still bring it up from time to time. After all, if being a Christian means being a disciple or follower of Jesus, then we’ve got to have some idea of what Jesus was all about. What did he say? What did he teach? How did he live? What was the nature of his ministry? Following means trying to walk in Jesus’ steps, or maybe in Jesus’ shoes. Or maybe trying to see the world the way Jesus saw it, so that we can respond to others and the world the way he responded. If we’re going to be followers of Jesus, our actions need to bear some resemblance to the actions of Jesus, don’t you think? How else is anybody going to know that we are Christians?

What *did* Jesus do? Jesus joined in the worship life of his people. We see that in this morning’s text from the Gospel of Luke. It was the sabbath, and Jesus went to the synagogue, and he took the opportunity to read from the scriptures, from the book of Isaiah. It’s important to note what that portion of scripture says, but first we simply note that Jesus participated in the religious life of his community. Jesus also prayed. There are not a lot of passages in the Gospels that speak of him praying, but it is clear that he was a man of prayer. And he taught his disciples to pray.

Biblical scholar Marcus Borg says that Jesus was, above all, a "spirit person," by which he means that Jesus possessed an experiential awareness of the reality of God [MEETING JESUS AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME, 30]. Jesus was in touch with God. Jesus was aware to a remarkable degree of a dimension of reality beyond the realm of the senses. He experienced himself and all of life as belonging also to this realm of the Spirit. To understand this is not necessarily to know what Jesus would do in this or that situation, but it is to know that for Jesus all of life was infused with the Spirit of God.

The art of living is the art of existing and acting in greater realization or awareness that our lives are in God. When we think about what Jesus did, and how he lived, the perception that he was a "spirit person" is of enormous importance. What Jesus did was not simply an exercise in good judgment, or an act of obedience to divine command, or a practical application of ethical rules. Jesus' actions cannot be understood simply in terms of rational behavior, or moral behavior, or ethical conduct. His actions seem to have been saturated with an awareness of the presence and power of God. They were a response to the reality of God in his life and in the midst of the life of the people.

But Jesus did not find God only in the privacy of prayer, or in the worship life of the community. Jesus traveled the countryside, he conversed and dined with all manner of people. Jesus observed and reflected on the world about him--seedtime and harvest, rain and sun, birds and flowers, the dynamics of family life, the conduct of business affairs, the disparities of social existence, the realities of economic injustice. One hears about all of these things and more in his parables and teachings.

Borg characterizes Jesus also as a teacher of wisdom. From common experience Jesus drew uncommon insights. He discerned what lay at the heart of many things that others regarded only in conventional or superficial ways. He knew that a person's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. He knew that people are invariably better able to see what they regard as their own interests than they are to appreciate the interests of other. He knew that pride and envy and riches and power get in the way of seeing things rightly and doing things justly.

Thus, as Borg also notes, Jesus was a social prophet. He was a critic of society, particularly hard on the elites. He preached and taught an alternative social vision, in which traditional social barriers were broken down and no one was excluded simply because of who they were. He called for repentance instead of condemnation, forgiveness instead of punishment, inclusion instead of separation. He taught his disciples to pray for God's kingdom, that is, God's way of governing and ordering, to come *on earth* – as it already is in heaven.

I started by saying that Jesus of Nazareth is someone who shows us the heart of God. God is a God of love and compassion, who cares about all of creation. It would be a mistake to think that the call to a compassionate, loving, accepting Christianity is a call to an easy life--lower standards, cheap grace, and the like. Not so at all. Because it isn't just you and me who God loves and cares about, it's everybody! How are we going to love and treat right those other folks that God also loves and cares about? It is a lot easier not to deal with folks who are different, folks you don't like or don't understand, folks with different values or perceptions, folks you don't think are living right. It's a lot harder to show them compassion. When it comes to a compassionate Christianity, every one of us still has a long way to go.

If we want to be Christians who follow Jesus, it seems to me that we must also show a special regard for those in our world who are most vulnerable, or beset by misfortune, disadvantage, or oppression. We should be able to see this clearly from Jesus' own teaching and ministry. Recall the Beatitudes, those sayings with which Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew: Jesus singles out particular sorts of persons for encouragement and blessing: the poor, those in mourning, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers.

The same thing can be said about that inaugural sermon that Jesus delivers in the synagogue – in this morning's text from Luke – where Jesus reads from the book of Isaiah: Jesus proclaims good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed. This is not more riches to those who are already wealthy. This is not special privileges to the powerful or the popular. This is a kind of reversal of worldly fortunes, where the meek and lowly are lifted up, where the hard-pressed are brought relief and restoration and new life, where the poor are the ones who receive good news. Recall the story of the final judgment in the Gospel of Matthew, where a final division is made between the sheep and the goats: the acid test comes down to feeding the hungry, giving drink to those who thirst, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and welcoming the stranger. It is what is done for the "least of these," says Jesus, that really matters (Matthew 25:31-46).

If being a Christian means being a follower of Jesus, then it must also have something to do with being transformed. In Charles Sheldon's novel, the people of the town are transformed – and their whole town is transformed – as a result of their efforts to live for one year in keeping with what Jesus would do. I think most of us realize that our natural inclinations are to look after ourselves, and those like us. We seek security, we seek peace of mind, we seek freedom to pursue our own agendas, we seek to be unhindered and undisturbed by those about us whom we cannot enlist to serve our own ends. To be transformed, however, is to live beyond all this, to live beyond our ordinary selves.

I don't pretend to be able to do this very often, and I surely do not find myself able to do so by sheer force of will. I have to believe that this is a gift of the Spirit, a power that comes from beyond ourselves, that enables us to transcend our own self-interests and achieve a higher standard of living.

For the very first community of Jesus' followers, that higher standard of living is described in these terms: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45). I submit that there is not a soul here who could achieve this higher standard of living on your own! But what if we were fully open to the transforming power of the Spirit? Who knows what might be possible?

Christianity is diametrically opposed to a dog-eat-dog, everyone for themselves, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps world. I'm not prepared to say that being a Christian requires this or that particular form of sharing of this world's goods. But I do believe it requires an openness to the divine possibilities of transformation. If becoming and being a Christian has never had any transformative effect upon your life, never empowered you to be more gracious, or more generous, or more trusting, or more self-giving, than you would otherwise be, then either Christianity is just a bunch of hot air, or there is something missing in your life. Acts says of the first disciples that "they ate their food" – the food that they were sharing with one another – "with glad and generous hearts." Their lives were being transformed.

There are a number of other things that might be said about being a Christian. There are three distinct Christian virtues that, along with the ancient Greek notions of virtue, have become central to our culture and its ways of thinking and acting in the world. These are faith, hope, and love. There is that familiar list of the fruits of the Spirit that the Apostle Paul related in his letter to the Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (5:22-23). One should be able to find evidences of these in every Christian life. Of course, one can also find evidences of these in other lives not Christian. God's Spirit is not bound by our definitions, or even our professions of faith or lack thereof.

What I hope I have offered here this morning is not a way to discriminate between those who are Christian and those who are not, or a way to separate the sheep from the goats, or a way to point the finger at someone or anyone who does not seem to measure up. I know I don't measure up!

Rather, I hope that there is something here, in Jesus' teaching and example, in the words of scripture, in the story of the first followers of Jesus and his Way, and in the claims of those like Paul who have witnessed to their faith, that each of us can take to heart – for ourselves, not for somebody else! How can you, how can I, be more true and loyal and loving? More faithful to that which we profess? More responsive to the claims of God's love upon us? More compassionate toward our hurting world?

There is plenty in this world that divides us, and will continue to divide us. But what about our common humanity, as children of God? As kin in God's kin-dom? Can we not find ways to help those who are most in need, to lift up those who are falling and failing, to liberate those who are burdened and oppressed, to give justice to those who are short-changed and exploited and abused?

Many people in our society these days seem to be seeking guidance in the art of living. They are not all asking for pat answers to their questions about what to think or how to act. They don't all expect some formula that can be applied to every situation. They are searching for guidance. They are looking for a model, or a practice, that will open them up to a higher or deeper or greater reality, to powers beyond their own. They need inspiration, confidence, vision, and hope for a way of life that promises a more authentic existence or a better world. If their search has not brought them to this or some other Christian sanctuary, perhaps it is because they have not heard of the Jesus of compassion. Or perhaps they have heard, but they have not found this Jesus to be the model for our lives.

You are a congregation that has recently said goodbye to your pastor who was not here very long. Things did not work out quite as many of you must have imagined and hoped. The days ahead will provide new challenges and opportunities. My prayer for all of you is that, as you work together in this interim period and for whatever future lies ahead, you will enjoy each other and have great times together, and that your life together will flourish. For that to happen in its fullness, I pray that together you will be further transformed in your lives as Christians, and that you will find ways to be a transforming presence in this place – because you are followers of Jesus who have heard and understood his message and because you seek to be open to the work of the Spirit of God, which is in Christ Jesus, the one who shows us the Way. AMEN.

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