

St. James Lutheran Church

Pentecost V

June 27, 2010

Richard Holmer

First Reading: 1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21

Second Reading: Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Gospel: Luke 9:51-62

To Follow Christ

Last Monday night we welcomed the newly elected members to the church council. By way of team-building, we took time for an exercise at getting better acquainted. We paired off, and each person responded to a series of questions. The partners then introduced each other to the rest of the group. One of the questions was: "What is the first thing you would tell someone about our congregation?" A number of persons answered in similar fashion. They said the first thing they would share is that we are a "friendly congregation." There was consensus around the table that this is true about St. James—that we are a warm-hearted community. Personally, I find this to be the case—and I certainly hope newcomers have this experience when they visit. It's good to be friendly and welcoming.

I thought more about this conversation as I read today's gospel and started working on this sermon. It surely is a positive thing to be friendly—yet this is true not only for the church. It's true for just about any organization or enterprise. Every club or business is improved by an atmosphere of warmth and friendliness.

Reading this story from Luke, it struck me that Christians are called to be more than friendly. Friendly is good—as far as it goes. Jesus was a friend to all—yet he was also more than a friend. Remember: Jesus didn't get in trouble for being overly friendly (even though some thought he befriended some rather questionable types.) Jesus generated major opposition because he said and did things that were troubling, because he

challenged and confronted people, because he made ultimate claims about himself and upon people's lives.

Consider today's gospel. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to be arrested and crucified, and he invites a man, saying, "Follow me." The guy is willing, and he makes what seems like a reasonable request; "First let me go and bury my father." Jesus says to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead."

How friendly is that?

Jesus invites another to come with him, and this one replies: "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." (He just wants to say goodbye and let his family know where he's going.) Jesus says: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God." Not what you'd call a warm welcome!

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This gospel text underscores that the ministry of Jesus isn't just about making friends, it's about making disciples. Jesus didn't invite people to be his buddies, but to be his followers.

If "friendliness" means keeping things light and convivial, never making anyone uncomfortable, not challenging anyone—then friendliness will have trumped faithfulness. Actually, true friends do: challenge us, hold us accountable, speak the truth to us, expect the best of us.

Jesus is a true friend—and in addition he is both Lord and Savior. As such, Jesus commands more from us than any friend ever could. He has authority to command our undivided attention, loyalty and commitment.

We should never mistake the graciousness of Christ for low expectations. Jesus is loving and compassionate—he's not casual or easy-going, certainly not laissez-faire!

The gospel message that Jesus brings is straight forward—even simple—but it's not easy. It's not that it's hard to understand what Jesus asks of us. What's hard is actually doing it. I find it a whole lot easier to talk about the gospel than I do actually living it.

“Follow me,” Jesus says. When we pay attention, we can see the path pretty clearly. Walking that path is something else.

What is it, then, to truly follow Christ? You know the answer:

- * It’s to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength—and your neighbor as yourself.
- * It’s to seek first the Kingdom of God.
- * It’s to deny yourself, take up a cross, and go where Jesus goes.
- * It’s to practice downward mobility, to become a servant to all.
- * It’s to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Again, this is much easier said than done. And in the church, when all is said and done, usually a lot more is said than done.

“Following Christ” is the first charge in our mission statement. How is that going for you? We would all agree that a person can’t follow Christ by standing still or staying the same. So how are you changing and growing as a follower of Jesus? What are you leaving behind? What have you had to relinquish in order to follow? What is the real cost to you to be a disciple?

That’s the paradox, isn’t it? It costs nothing to be a Christian—because Christ paid the price in full on the cross. And at the same time it costs everything: Jesus said: “Those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will find it.”

A Christian life is known by the fruit it bears, and Paul lists some of these fruits in our reading from Galatians:

love	patience	faithfulness
joy	kindness	gentleness
peace	generosity	self-control

All these are the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives—they are gifts of grace. Yet these gifts also require much of us. Consider, what does it cost in terms of energy, devotion, concentration, sacrifice and discipline: to love another person

- to stay patient
- to show kindness
- to be generous

to remain faithful

to maintain self-control?

Paul announces the wonderful news that Christ has set us free—and then he adds: “only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” SLAVES!! Too often we Americans have presumed that freedom means self-indulgence. Paul says we are free to become slaves to one another.

This tension between the freedom of the gospel and the demands of the gospel led Soren Kierkegaard to observe: “It is hard to believe because it is so hard to obey.”

So what’s your excuse? When Christ calls to come and follow, what do you have to say? First let me bury my father? Let me go and say goodbye to my spouse? I have children to raise? I have a mortgage to pay? I just got accepted to college?

The real question is: Are we trying to fit following Christ into our lifestyle—or are we trying to let following Christ become our lifestyle? I repeat: Are we trying to fit following Christ into our lifestyle—or are we trying to let following Christ become our lifestyle?

Or another way to put it: Are you willing to live without excuses? Forgiveness is another gospel paradox: It’s a great blessing because it forever removes the burden of guilt and recrimination. Forgiveness is also a challenge because it removes all our old excuses. We can no longer say, “I’m not good enough to follow Christ,” because Christ’s forgiveness now makes us new and fresh and good enough. We have no valid excuse!

Frederick Buechner gets to the heart of this matter of following Jesus Christ: Jesus didn’t say that any particular ethic, doctrine or religion was the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He said that he was. He didn’t say that it was by believing or doing anything in particular that you could ‘come to the Father.’ He said that it was only by him—by living, participating in, being caught up by the way of life that he embodied, that was his way...A Christian is one who is on the way.”

So I ask you: Are you “on the way?”

Are you "caught up by the way of life Christ embodied?"

I hope we will always be seen as a friendly church.

How we answer such questions will determine if we are also a faithful church.

Amen