

Following in His Steps

From the Lenten sermon series: The Human Face of God

Text: 1 Peter 2:21

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Christ suffered on your behalf, and thereby left you an example; it is for you to follow in His steps. 1 Peter 2:21

God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. That profound and mysterious statement from the Apostle Paul sums up very much the focus of this season, as we look at the human face of God by focusing on the face of Jesus Christ. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. That is the mystery of our salvation. And we noted last week that it was Jesus' intention from the beginning, from the dawning of his own consciousness, of his own calling fully to follow the will of God. His was an intentional obedience. It was an intentional obedience throughout the days of his life, and his death was simply the consequence of the life that he lived.

And so, the life becomes a pattern for those who would follow him, for those who would in our day become contemporary disciples. The shape of contemporary discipleship is something that each of us must determine for his own life. The shape of contemporary discipleship will not be the same for us all, for we are not the clones of Jesus, but we are called to follow Jesus. We are called to follow Jesus, living out the vision with which our own lives are stirred and fascinated, and only when we're living out of our own vision will we have the inward strength and the power to live truly according to those best insights and that highest calling that we have sensed as our lives have been exposed to Jesus, who brings us to God. And this morning the text from that first letter of Peter, the second chapter in the 21st verse, where Peter tells us that Jesus had given us an example He suffered for us, giving us an example that we should follow in his steps. Following Jesus is our theme this morning. Following in his steps. That word from Peter inspired a nineteenth-century preacher, Charles Sheldon, to write a little book which has been published and republished and republished. It's called *In His Steps*. Many of you have read it. If you haven't read it, you ought to read it, even though it has all of the odors of the nineteenth century and is definitely a

time piece; nonetheless, the impact of its message continues to come through very powerfully.

A rather sophisticated pastor in a rather sophisticated congregation on Saturday was busily engaged in his sermon preparation for Sunday, when a poor, malnourished beggar appeared at his door seeking help. And of course, the pastor, having in mind all of his people on Sunday and his heavy responsibility, was unable to respond to the need, and turned him away. And he preached about following Jesus that next Sunday morning, when the man, at the conclusion of the message, appeared in the sanctuary and raised the question, in his rags, in his pitiable condition, "I wonder what it means to follow Jesus?"

And, of course, the pastor, not being totally lost, felt the impact and the guilt of his own neglect and called for those who would join with him in a new adventure of discipleship and a band of disciples in that congregation began a year's experiment in which they determined in their work and in their play, in their community life, in their family life, in the totality of their lives they would do nothing, make no decision before they asked the question, "What would Jesus do?" And the story narrated in the book is the story of a community transformed by a band of people asking that question and responding as best they could answer it.

A college president getting involved in municipal election, dealing with a blight in the community; a corporate executive, discovering corruption in the corporation, exposing it and resigning rather than being a part of it; the newspaper editor changing the perspective with which news was reported. Great opposition was engendered, obviously, but transformation happened, as well, because there was a band of people who began to ask, in every situation of life, "What would Jesus do?" And the inspiration for that, of course, was our text, "Christ has given you an example that you should follow in his steps."

Following Jesus. Ernie Campbell, a former pastor of Riverside Church in NYC, wrote an article a few years ago based on a sermon that he had preached, "Following Jesus or Believing in Christ," and he made an interesting point, that when he was a young person in communicant's class, the question that was asked by the Elders of the church was whether he believed in Christ. And when he declared himself to be a candidate for ministry, the question was asked him, Do you believe in Christ? And when he was ordained to the ministry, the question was asked, Do you believe in Christ? And every time he was installed in another congregation, the question was asked, Do you believe in Christ? And the answer always was, Absolutely, yes, with all my heart. But he makes the point that in all of those situations throughout the whole of his life, the question was never put to him, Are you following Jesus?

It is possible to believe in Christ without following Jesus. So, what is it to follow Jesus? To follow Jesus is not simply to imitate Jesus. Otherwise, we'd all have to don bathrobes and sandals and become itinerate, wandering teachers. The point

is not to imitate Jesus in the 20th century because we don't want to simply duplicate, nor would it be possible to duplicate the actions, the decisions of Jesus out of the 1st century, transported wholesale into the 20th century. But to follow Jesus must be to follow him in terms of his spirit, in terms of his attitude, in terms of his response to God and his response to the human situation, to determine in our context what Jesus would do, given what we know about him from the Gospel portrait of him.

To follow Jesus in our day, we will have to learn who the enemies are that we are called to love, and where the hungry are that we're called to feed, and where the broken and the lost are that we're called to communicate and mediate the grace of God. The shape of discipleship in our day will be a shape that must be determined by every one of us, and we must all live out our own vision. We are not the clones of Jesus, but we are the followers of Jesus, and in this Lenten pilgrimage we are attempting this Spring to come face to face with the call of Jesus Christ to follow him and to determine what the shape of contemporary discipleship would be - for you and for me.

Jesus gave us an example, says Peter, and we are to follow in his steps. If you read that word in its context, you will find that it's a rather foreign word to us, a rather alien context to us. There's a word about being subject to all human institutions which is in the paragraph before I began to read, and that word was addressed to a largely slave church, and the point of Peter's counsel there is that the slave was to live out his life in the parameters of that servitude in a way that would give honor to Jesus Christ. That was the specific counsel. Now, you can't translate that literally into the 20th century where we become the disciples of Jesus, free people in a democratic nation, the most powerful nation of the earth. Some translation has to take place there, obviously. We know that there is a time when we cannot simply blindly submit. There is a time when, for conscience' sake, in the cause of justice and righteousness, because of the inspiration of Jesus Christ, we must stand up and say no. But, Peter's counsel, in that context, was appealing to those slaves (and there were 60 million slaves in the 1st century, in the Roman Empire) – his counsel to people in that context was to win honor to God by their honorable conduct and their nobility of spirit. He addresses the subject of slavery and their attitude toward their masters.

And the Gospel has been criticized because it took nineteen centuries before the question of slavery was finally settled. Once again, the institution of slavery was undercut by the Gospel because masters and slaves were alike called to respond to every human being as a human being. A slave in the early centuries was a thing, not a person, and masters were given counsel as well as the slaves, but, to be sure, the institution of slavery was not attacked. What the Gospel addressed was that inner servitude of the human heart and soul, not the external condition. That came later as an outworking of the implication of the Gospel. A little further on, after we stopped reading, there is counsel to wives and to husbands, and I didn't read that because I didn't want all the wives to walk out, mad this morning.

You can read it on your way home, but I would suggest that you don't pick it up for Sunday dinner devotions. The model there is Sarah who called Abraham Lord, and went wherever he went. Marvelous! Only it doesn't work anymore. The whole context, the whole passage needs to be translated, because, again, it was a very specific word addressed to a very specific people at a very specific time. But even there we can get the drift, we can listen to the text long enough in order to determine that the call to us out of that word is to follow Jesus in the 20th century in our context, in our history, in our culture, in our society, in our community, in our families. And the spirit of Jesus Christ, that spirit that comes through throughout the New Testament, is a spirit to inform us and to inspire us and to empower us, as we seek to be contemporary disciples of Jesus.

Peter says that Jesus is our example. When he was abused, he didn't retaliate. When he suffered unjustly, he didn't respond in anger. When he was crucified, in what must be the apex of human gracefulness, he said to the Father, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." In Jesus there was this masterful freedom that we noted last week, this magnificent freedom, self-mastery, inward strength which enabled him to be in command in every situation because he was totally submissive to the will of the Father. Because he lived before the face of God, he feared no human institution and could be coerced by no human pressure group.

Jesus, we noted last week, did not fit anywhere. There was no ideological group that could co-opt him for their cause; there was no well-meaning group that could, somehow or other, engage him and use him for their own ends. Jesus was sold out to God and, consequently, he walked with a masterful freedom in relationship to all human institutions and groups. Jesus was his own person because he was God's person, and in his willingness to suffer and to die, he has left an example to all who would follow him to adopt his spirit and mode of behaviour, although the particular response in any given situation will have to be determined by that vision that is dawned upon any individual human heart.

This week as I was reflecting on this, I thought of Bonhoeffer. I always have to pull my Bonhoeffer down during Lent. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was martyred in 1945 as a consequence of having joined in an assassination plot to do away with Hitler during the Nazi terror. His *Letters and Papers From Prison*, you know, are probably the favourite spiritual testament of my life, and so I always bring him down and refresh myself again on the marvelous way in which he responded to his call to discipleship in that very critical period in our own century. And I was reading again in his biography that in 1939, when he had visited this country, he wrestled for a month with the question of whether to return to Germany or not. He was at Union Seminary in New York City. Reinhold Niebuhr had invited him to come, and Hitler was right at the apex of his power and his ravishing at that time. And friends of Bonhoeffer pleaded with him to remain in this country. He was a brilliant theologian. He was a passionate Christian. He had this tremendous potential, and they pled with him to stay here in order that he might be spared and saved for a full life, a useful life for decades to come.

In 1939, he took the last boat for Europe, for he said, "I may not participate in the upbuilding and restoration of my people after this terrible conflagration if I stay here in security, while they are suffering. I must join in solidarity with my people at this time, if I would participate in the new day that will dawn." And he said, "I know not what choice others may make, but for me, I must will the downfall of my own nation that Western civilization may prevail, for to will the success of my nation is to will the devastation of civilization." A hard choice! You see, the context of our text says, "Be subject to every human institution." But Bonhoeffer said, "There is presently in Germany a governmental institution that is an instrument of evil, and I must oppose it." His discipleship took a form in contrast to the counsel of Peter in a different context of history, and yet, I believe, in response to that very central appeal of our text to follow in the steps of Jesus. For Jesus was not a kind of a passive, weak, simpering, non-entity. Jesus was strong, and Jesus was free, and Jesus actively opposed what was wrong.

Last week I mentioned Andre Trocmé, the French Huguenot pastor, who in La Chambon the French village in South France, created the village as a refuge for Jewish refugees who defied the French Vichy government that was the instrument of the Gestapo, who defied their order to turn over the Jews.

However, Trocmé, in 1939, when Bonhoeffer was going back to Europe, wrote in his own diary, "Should I go and infiltrate the Nazi organization, that I might assassinate Hitler?" Trocmé's mother was German; he spoke German and French with equal ease, he could just as well have slipped across the border. He was a very dynamic, powerful person; he could very well have gotten himself into that organization. In 1939 he actually put in his diary, "Should I go and do it, in order to stop what must be this ravage of darkness that is encompassing the continent?" He said, "No. That course is not open to me. To do so would be to separate myself from Jesus."

In 1944, Bonhoeffer made the conscious decision to join a small group of conspirators who determined that the only solution was the violent end of Hitler. Now, it's so fascinating to me – here you have two theologians, two pastors, two passionate men, two men of great loving heart, of great energy, of great intellect, and both of them actively engaged, both of them proactive because of their discipleship of Jesus Christ, who came to a different conclusion as to whether or not to take an action of violence against Hitler. To be sure, five years separated the decisions. I don't know what Trocmé might have done in Bonhoeffer's shoes at that point; nonetheless, it's interesting to me that here were two very genuine, engaged disciples of Jesus wrestling with the same question, one saying, "I cannot do violence," the other saying, "I have no alternative but to do violence."

A couple of years ago, in Union Seminary in New York, there was the commemoration of Bonhoeffer, and Edgar Bethke, the great biographer of Bonhoeffer, was asked the question, "How could Bonhoeffer, as a Christian, justify getting involved in a conspiracy in an assassination plot?" And Bethke's

response was, "He saw no alternative." He said, "If there is someone going down the streets of a village killing people, the question is not how you cannot attempt to put an end to it, the question is how you can sit there and let it happen. You'd have to stop it."

Phillip Hallie, who in 1979 wrote the book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, about Trocmé and Le Chambon, the village of the refugees, said he got a letter from someone out East who wrote to him a very scorching letter, who said, "You have set forth Trocmé and Le Chambon as a passivist village that did good and was goodness incarnate, and you haven't even touched the issue. There could have been Le Chambons and there could have been Pastor Trocmés all over the world, but someone had to stop Hitler." And Hallie said, "That's true. I have to acknowledge the truth of that criticism." The point is not that one is right or one is wrong. The point is that here were two followers of Jesus who both were pro-life, proactive, fully engaged, strong, caring, putting their life on the line, one saying the only alternative is a violent response, the other saying violence is always wrong for me.

Trocmé was imprisoned in a concentration camp for his activities for a period of time, but it was touch and go in those days, and so they called him out in a month or two and they said, "You may be released if you will sign this statement pledging your allegiance and your complete obedience to the French leader of the Vichy government." All he had to do was write his name and walk out free. He said, "I can't sign that. My conscience is bound to the will of God. I cannot sign that." So they said, "You'll rot in prison." He said, "I'll rot in prison," and they led him back to his cell.

Now, you see, we're not talking about a simpering kind of saccharine weakness that goes around the world trying to keep out of trouble, trying to be secure and find a measure of success and just keep out of any danger. That's not the issue. And the issue is not that we are all called to be clones of a certain kind. But the issue is this – we are all called to follow Jesus and to live out a vision that dawns upon our own hearts and lives as the consequence of the impact that Jesus has made upon us. We are called to follow in his steps.

That's an exciting call. As I reflect on Jesus and the reverberations of Jesus that trickle down the centuries, finding expression in an André Trocmé and a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I find that such a person is God-obsessed. There is a conscious certainty of the reality of the good and gracious God. And one is willing and able to commit one's cause to God. Isn't part of the problem of our human existence with its meaninglessness the fact that we're not sure that God is, and therefore that there is One to whom we may commit our cause? Jesus committed his cause to God. And Trocmé committed his cause to God. Bonhoeffer committed his cause to God. And then I find also that such a life is a life that is proactive, it is a life that is engaged. Not trying to survive, not trying to just get by, but living – living positively, with attention. Annie Dillard says that prayer is attention,

plugged in, tuned in, aware. Aware of one's world, one's community, one's neighbor, one's family, one's life. Living with attention. And I find that such a life, as I've mentioned before, is a life of wonderful freedom.

Jesus didn't fit anywhere. Trocmé was a free man. Even the French Reformed Church couldn't bring him into line, his conscience captive to the will of God. Bonhoeffer – what freedom he had. The marvelous poem that I've shared with you many times, "Who Am I?" They tell me I'm like one accustomed to live like one who is in charge," yet he's in prison. He says, "I feel like a bird in a cage." But he struggles with that inward feeling, and yet, to all outward appearances, he was one who was alive and in charge, even in prison. He says, in the concluding lines, "What am I, Lord? Am I this or am I that? Whatever I am, Thou knowest, O Lord, I am thine." Marvelous freedom!

And then, paradoxically, joy. Joy. Trocmé was like a two-ton truck of love, rolling through the world. There was joy! Bonhoeffer brought joy to the prison camp to the cellmates. It was contagious. And Jesus, with the joy that was set before him, endured the cross.

Freedom, joy, pro-life, obsessed with God. That's living, Maybe I set Jesus before you and a couple of his followers, maybe you want to slink off to the sides and say, "Wow. Who am I?" And our discipleship looks rather shoddy and shabby, I am sure. But I don't want to conclude with that strong call to discipleship without putting it in the context of grace, to say that those of us who have moved the farthest down the line have only just begun. And those of us who haven't yet begun aren't far behind. And the call is from the good and gracious God who says, "I love you. Not on the basis of your performance, but because I love you. Now, come and follow your elder Brother, Jesus Christ, our Lord."

Thanks be to God, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.