

Would you describe yourself as ‘mature’? Perhaps you have heard the saying that “maturity is when you stop making excuses and start making changes.”

There are a lot of excuses being made in today’s gospel passage, and Jesus is not persuaded by any of them. Jesus said to one person, “Follow me.” And the person responded with an excuse: “First let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him “Let the dead bury their own dead. As for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Jesus appears to be saying, “If you want to be a follower of Christ, stop making excuses and get on with it.”

Another person said to Jesus, “I will follow you, Lord. But let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” In other words, a person who begins plowing a field and then looks back, risks losing control of the plow. It is not possible to look behind you and end up with straight furrows.

Following Christ means committing to look ahead with single-minded resolve to the future Kingdom of God, and not obsessing over our past, which we cannot change. You can almost hear the exasperation in Jesus’ voice as he appears to be saying to this second person as well, “If you want to be a follower of Christ, stop making excuses and get on with it.”

Do you ever find yourself making excuses for not following Christ more fully? Even over the simple stuff. Like making excuses for not praying more sincerely, or not reading Holy Scripture more often, or not attending worship more regularly, or not forgiving more readily, or not helping someone in need more generously? If you ever make excuses for not living your Christian beliefs as fully and truthfully as you know in your heart that you should, believe me, I understand. I am a master at making excuses for my own lax religious practices.

There is a barnyard fable about a farmer’s chicken who suggested to the cow that they make breakfast for the farmer. The cow cheerfully responded, “Great! What will we serve him?” The chicken replied, “I will supply the eggs and you supply the meat.” The cow’s enthusiasm immediately dropped as she realized the ramifications of what she had just agreed to. The cow sadly replied to the chicken: “For you, providing eggs is devotion, but for me providing meat is total sacrifice.” And the cow walked away.

Like the cow in the story, the two men who spoke with Jesus in today’s gospel story were seemingly prepared to change their lives and quite literally follow Jesus. But like the cow, they were stopped fast in their tracks when confronted with the full measure of the demands of Christian discipleship. They each had a convenient excuse, perhaps even a reasonable excuse for delaying, for hesitating. But Jesus held them to a higher standard, as Christ continues to hold to a higher standard anyone, including you and me, who would profess to be his follower. His instruction seems clear and uncompromising: to answer Christ’s call to “follow me” is to yield ourselves wholeheartedly to the Lord. We do not learn discipleship by studying it—at some point we must do it.

Here is a question for you: do you regard Jesus as someone to worship, or someone to follow? There is a difference. Both worshipping Jesus and following Jesus have merit, but in today’s gospel reading Jesus is urging us to follow him. The risk in looking upon Jesus as a person from the distant past to worship, is expecting him to save us from our difficulties, to rescue us from danger, to keep us from harm. After all, is that not we would expect an all-knowing, all-powerful, all loving Christ to do for us? But such thinking can be problematic if we end up turning Jesus into a religion, instead of following Jesus on a journey toward union with God.

This morning we read together Psalm 77, which is a stark reminder that life brings us all sorts of storms. Sometimes, life’s storms approach slowly; we know they are coming. Other storms appear suddenly and are unexpected. Like a quick flash of lightning, they are upon us. God is not always discernible in those storms that descend upon us. In fact, just the opposite can happen; the storms of our life are only made worse when we cannot see any trace of a helpful God nearby. We encounter storms, with no refuge in sight, and no warm comforting presence of God immediately evident. But

what we do know about storms, every storm, is that sooner or later they pass, or they lessen in intensity. Eventually, we come out on the other side of the storms. We might not come out unscathed or unchanged, but we do re-emerge.

If maturity is when we “stop making excuses and start making changes,” then following Jesus is an activity for the mature. To follow Jesus is to be transformed, changing ourselves into more of the person God is calling each of us to be. What Jesus calls us to do can seem like hard work. Without offering up excuses, we are expected to share love, to spread joy, to wage peace, to foster patience, to nurture kindness, to exhibit generosity, to seek faithfulness, to cultivate gentleness, and to strive for better self-control. Doing these things is the difference between following Jesus, and just worshipping him.

Encompassing all of Christ’s expectations of us is that we love others. But loving others, as we well know, can be a tough assignment. As one writer expressed it, we are expected to “love those you cannot love. Love those who are poor and broken and fouled and dirty and sick with sores. Love those who wish to strike you on both cheeks. Love the blowhard, the pompous ass, the arrogant liar. Find the Christ in each heart. Preach the Gospel and only, if necessary, talk about it. Be the Word. It is easy to advise and pronounce and counsel and suggest and lecture; it is not so easy to do what must be done.”

Loving others can be a tough assignment. Perhaps it can help if we put it into broader perspective by recalling what St. Augustine said on the subject: “God loves you as though you are the only person in the world, and God loves everyone the way God loves you.”

C.S. Lewis wrote, “Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping your heart intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it safe in the coffin of your selfishness. But in that coffin, where your heart is safe, motionless, airless it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.” Obviously, the answer is to share love, not keep it to ourselves.

Given the demands placed upon any person who in good conscience claims to be a follower of Christ, should we be concerned, should we worry that we are always at risk of falling far short of Christ’s expectations of us?

Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu who perhaps more than any other person alive in the 20th century inspired around the world movements of civil rights and non-violent civil disobedience, studied the scriptures of many world religions to test their teachings against his own experience. Can you guess the one common truth that he distilled from all those sacred writings? It was this: Do not worry in the least about yourself, leave all worry to God.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a story about an eighty-five-year-old woman from rural Kentucky who was asked in an interview to look back over her life and reflect on what she had learned. Her philosophy sounds similar to Gandhi’s. With a touch of wistfulness that any of us might echo when asked to comment on what we would do differently if we had all our life to live over again, the woman said, “If I had my life to live over, I would dare to make more mistakes next time. I would relax. I would be sillier. I would take fewer things seriously. I would eat more ice cream and less beans. I would have more actual troubles but fewer imaginary ones. You see, I am one of those people who lived seriously and sanely hour by hour, day after day. I’ve been one of those persons who never went anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat, and a parachute. If I had it to do again, I would travel lighter.”

I like that image of living better and more faithfully by travelling lighter. To follow Jesus is to put God first and travel lighter by letting our own will and desires take second place. Travelling lighter as a Christian means having an open heart, rather than a closed one. It means sensing God’s love and giving love in return. It means doing good because we love it and want to, not because we are obligated to. It means avoiding evil not because it is

against the rules, but because it is what we know God wants for us. And finally, following Jesus, travelling lighter, is to embrace whole heartedly what St. Augustine said: “God loves you as though you are the only person in the world, and God loves everyone the way God loves you.” **Amen.**

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

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