

## **FOLLOWING JESUS**

Psalm 23 and John 10:22-30

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
17 April 2016

Consider for a moment how much of life is about who - or what - you follow. We know what happens to people who always follow the crowd. They lose their identity, their sense of self, they even begin to lose knowledge of their own likes and dislikes. They're simply followers.

There are people who choose to follow the money - financial considerations always come first for them.

Then there are people who follow the Cleveland Browns. What do we call them? Gluttons for punishment? Martyrs?

All followers pledge some sort of loyalty, whether spoken or unspoken, to the entity we choose to follow.

Every one of us who has taken baptismal vows, confirmed those vows, joined this church -- if we call ourselves Christian, we have made a promise to be a different kind of follower. One of the analogies used in the Bible is the relationship between sheep and shepherd. It was an analogy that worked well at one time, because people were intimately familiar with shepherds and sheep.

In our world, we don't see shepherds out in the fields herding their animals, but still we understand the imagery. Shepherds take care of their sheep, they want the best for them, they call them by name. When we read passages like our selections for this morning, we feel the care of God for and in our lives.

Jesus calls us to follow him into a very particular kind of life. He calls himself a shepherd. Why do sheep follow their shepherd? Because the shepherd knows what's

best for the sheep. The shepherd leads them into the greenest fields for grazing, the shepherd protects the sheep from all who would do them harm. The shepherd knows that the sheep need cool water for refreshment, and the shepherd knows they need their rest. Sheep follow the shepherd because the way of life the shepherd offers is the best life possible.

Jesus is called, in the gospels, the good shepherd, but we don't have to be like sheep in every way. Analogies are not meant to be taken literally. We choose to follow, not out of some base instinct for survival like sheep have, but because we have made a conscious decision, with both our hearts and minds fully engaged. We choose to follow Jesus because we know what life is like when we follow other people or things. We know that worshiping materialism makes us feel empty. We know that worshiping comfort leaves us feeling lost. Following celebrities? Do we really want that lifestyle? We choose to follow Jesus because it is the path towards abundant life.

Abundant life for us -- lives of joy, meaning and purpose -- and abundant life for the whole of the created universe. Because following Jesus leads to transformation.

Being a Christian is not essentially about being a nice person, but about following in the footsteps of Jesus, taking his teachings seriously, letting his Spirit take the lead in our lives, and in so doing helping to change the world from our nightmare into God's dream.

You have heard this quote, first penned by George Bernard Shaw and made more famous by Robert Kennedy, "Some people see things as they are and ask why. I dream things that never were and ask why not."

Why not?

Why not a world where no child will ever go to bed hungry again?

Why not a world in which poverty is truly history, a thing of the past?

Why not a world in which every person is treated and valued as a child of God?

Why not a world where we lay down our swords and shields...as the old song goes...down by the riverside, to study war no more?

Why not a world reconciled to our God and to each other as children of God and brothers and sisters of one another?

Why not a world that looks less like the nightmare of our own human devising, and more like the dream of God's creating?

Why not?

We who would be disciples of Jesus are people who have made a commitment to follow his teachings, his manner of life, and the loving and liberating reality of his Spirit in the direction of God's dream.

The Rev. Michael Curry\* is the new head of the Episcopal church in the United States. I heard him preach last year and last weekend I read his book. He calls it Crazy Christians (A Call to Follow Jesus) and here's some of what he says:

People in the days of Jesus thought he was crazy. And people who dare to live the way of Jesus in our own time will also be called crazy. I suspect that is what Jesus was getting at when he said, "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."

What would it mean to live the counter-cultural life of real discipleship?

What the church needs, what this world needs, are some Christians who are as crazy as Jesus. Crazy enough to love like Jesus, to give like Jesus, to forgive like Jesus, to do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God – like Jesus. Crazy enough to dare to

change the world from the nightmare it often is into something closer to the dream that God dreams for it.

Sometimes that means marching to the beat of a different drummer. Sometimes that means caring more when we are tempted to care less. Sometimes that means standing up when others are sitting down. Sometimes that means speaking up when others are shutting up. Sometimes that means being different.

**(Apple “Think Different” ad)**

We could paraphrase to say, “Christians who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.”

Crazy enough to believe that God is real and that Jesus lives. Crazy enough to follow the radical way of the gospel. Crazy enough to believe that the love of God is greater than all the powers of evil and death. Crazy enough to believe, as Martin Luther King Jr. often said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” We need some Christians crazy enough to believe that the world doesn’t have to be the way it often seems to be. Crazy enough to catch a glimpse of the crazy, transforming, transfiguring, life-changing vision of Jesus. And Christians crazy enough to follow him into the work of helping God realize God’s dream for all people and for all creation.

As I was traveling this past week, thinking about Curry’s book, Crazy Christians, and thinking about this congregation, it has occurred to me that what I love about the Avon Lake UCC is that we, indeed, have some crazy people. Or people who do crazy things.

We have people in this church who give money in a sacrificial manner. People who give up that extra meal in a restaurant, or that brand-new car, or that vacation so that they can give money to the ministry and mission here. That is crazy counter-cultural behavior.

We have people who give up their comfortable beds to spend the night here at the church during the weeks when we host homeless families. Why would anyone do that? Because following Jesus means living a life of hospitality. It's not always easy or comfortable.

We have hundreds of volunteer hours given every week at our thrift shop, hours spent sorting clothing, greeting shoppers, cleaning, operating the cash register. Even though sometimes there's shoplifting, and sometimes you'd rather stay home. Why? Because that store makes miracles happen, and it's life-changing to be a part of it.

There are the people who show up here every Saturday morning to tackle a never-ending to-do list. People who share their talent in landscaping, painting, plumbing. People who wire and tinker and clean the church basement. Even though there are chores to be done in their own homes. It's crazy, isn't it? And thank God for them. Because our church doesn't have the budget for this kind of work, and our church is so much better maintained because of their gifts of time and talent.

And what about those who are crazy enough to say "yes" when called by the Nominating Team to serve on a board or committee? Crazy enough to say "yes" to serving as a confirmation mentor, a youth group volunteer, a Sunday School teacher, a musician with our choir or bell choir or worship band? We're all busy. Who wants to commit their free time to something that doesn't pay or look good on a resume? Thank goodness we have some crazy followers of Jesus in this congregation.

Following Jesus, discipleship, is about the head and the heart and also about what you do with your feet. Let me explain. The word 'disciple' in both Hebrew and Greek originates in education. A rabbi in ancient times, as in modern times, was not merely a teacher of the head but also a teacher of the heart. The rabbi taught a way of life. A pupil

therefore was not simply an academic student. The pupil was a disciple who sought to live the way of and follow in the steps of the teacher.

So discipleship is about feet. The writer Frederick Buechner puts it this way: “Feet are religious too. I say if you want to know who you are...you could do a lot worse than look at your feet for an answer...if you want to know who you are, watch your feet, because where your feet take you, that is who you are.”

Discipleship is about following Jesus, not only with your heart and your mind, but with your feet.

What does it mean to be a disciple? It means following Jesus until his footsteps and ours become indistinguishable.

Discipleship is about focusing on Jesus, following in the footsteps of Jesus, becoming his hands and feet in the world. Discipleship is about loving as Jesus loves, giving as Jesus gives, forgiving as Jesus forgives, including as Jesus includes, and welcoming as Jesus welcomes.

Let’s follow Jesus by refusing to accept the world as it is, by asking, “Why not?” Why not even more hours given to mission and ministry? Why not support the church with more vigor, more enthusiasm, more sacrificial giving? Why not welcome more and different people, why not advocate for justice, why not speak up? Why not believe that God’s better world is possible and that we can be the agents of transformation?

\*This sermon draws heavily on Curry’s book, Crazy Christians.