

"#FollowMe"
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Christ the King Sunday
November 26, 2017

Old Testament Reading: Jeremiah 23:1-6

¹Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord.
²Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. ³Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord. ⁵The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

New Testament Reading: Luke 23: 33-43

³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." ³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."



Sermon: *"#FollowMe"*

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the last day of the Church year and next Sunday, the first Sunday of the season of Advent, will kick off a new year in the church calendar. In the church, we begin a new year by preparing our hearts and minds for the celebration of Christ coming into the world, then we end the year by celebrating the person of Jesus Christ as our King. So, our year is bookended with celebrations of Christ's birth at the beginning and of his royal authority at the end.

And to say that Christ is King is a significant statement in a world filled with competitors for that title. Who rules our lives? By our lives lived as disciples of Christ, we proclaim that Jesus does. But regardless of what we say, or what we want to believe, you can tell who truly reigns in our hearts by who we actually follow.

Now to follow someone means to imitate their path and to work toward the same destination or results as they have done. Students follow a teacher. An apprentice follows a master craftsman. But today the concept of following another person has taken on a drastically different connotation thanks to social media. Nowadays when people talk about “following” someone, they usually mean going on Twitter, or Instagram, and simply repeating or reposting the words and images posted by the people they follow. Following someone in this way means connecting in a more superficial way and tends toward honoring personality rather than substance.

How prevalent is social media? Well, in 2012 the American Dialect Society chose “hashtag” as it’s word of the year.¹ The hashtag is what we used to call the pound sign; that little tic-tac-toe symbol on your phone. If you’re familiar with social media, then you probably know what a hashtag is. For the rest of you, well, it’s a symbol that helps you to add your posts to a wider conversation. If you post about a certain topic and then add a hashtag in front of it, every time someone searches for that topic, your post will come up in their search results.²

That the word “hashtag” was chosen as a “Word of the Year” speaks to how ubiquitous social media is in our modern culture and how important being connected to the world has become. When we log on, we can see instantly what’s going on in the lives of friends we haven’t seen in years and family members who live hundreds of miles away; we can share ideas with and tap into the creativity of people we may have never actually met.

And while social media has allowed us unprecedented access to one another’s lives and an ease of communication previously unknown in human history, it has also diminished somewhat the level of discourse and the depth with which we interact. Twitter, for instance, was founded on the idea of brief, succinct comments limited to no more than 140 characters. Not 140 words; 140 *characters*. Just this month, that character limit was doubled to 280 characters.

But just because the character limit has gone up, doesn’t mean the level of discourse has.

With 280 characters you could tweet the most famous part of the Declaration of Independence (We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...), you could tweet John 3:16, twice, or two verses of Amazing Grace.

¹Schuessler, Jennifer. "Tweet This: 'Hashtag' Named Word of the Year." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 7 Jan. 2013. Web. 22 Nov. 2013. <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/07/tweet-this-hashtag-named-word-of-the-year-by-american-dialect-society/?_r=0>.

²Hiscott, Rebecca. "The Beginner's Guide to the Hashtag." *Mashable*. Mashable, Inc, 8 Oct. 2013. Web. 22 Nov. 2013. <<http://mashable.com/2013/10/08/what-is-hashtag/>>.

And when we subscribe to the twitter feed of another person we call that “following.” You might follow friends or family members and thus have access to their daily ramblings and musings, or you might follow a celebrity or two, or even a noted philosopher or thinker who might actually have something worth reading.

So, who is the most followed person in the world? Singer Katy Perry with over 106 million followers. Second is Justin Bieber with just a few million less.³ These celebrities and hundreds like them, have tens of millions of people who follow them on Twitter... and what does that mean? It means they get access to little pearls of wisdom like this one from Katy Perry who posted on November 7 “Remember you're not failing, you're learning.”⁴ And this one from Justin Bieber who posted on Monday: “Everyone have an amazing week.”⁵

For all the benefits of the internet, one of its major shortfalls is the tendency to lift the banal to the status of wisdom; to elevate moderately talented people to the status of icon; to spread half-truth and innuendo and outright lies around the world, unchallenged, unchecked. Mark Twain reportedly once said that “a lie can travel half-way around the world while the truth is [still] putting on its shoes.”⁶ Mark Twain had no idea.

Social media gives every voice a chance to be heard, but that doesn't mean that every voice has something important to say. Jesus' voice is worth paying attention to. But when we talk about following Jesus we mean a much deeper connection than simply reading His words and repeating them. When we proclaim Christ as king, then we are stating our intent to follow Him in what we do and how we live, every day.

When I was a boy, my father used to plant a garden. It was a pretty elaborate garden that covered roughly a quarter acre or so. He would till it each spring before he would plant rows of carrots and corn and squash and watermelons. He used a gas-powered roto-tiller that would turn the earth; transforming the land from a hard, crusty surface to soft, loamy soil. One of my clearest memories of childhood is the image of my father, walking behind that tiller, up and down the rows methodically turning the soil, his shoes leaving large, man-sized prints in the soft earth.

My sister and I would make a game out of walking behind him, trying to step exactly in his foot prints. My dad is a tall man, so his stride was naturally longer than we could easily match, so we

³ “List of Most-Followed Twitter Accounts.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 21 Nov. 2017, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most-followed_Twitter_accounts.

⁴ Perry, Katy. “Tweet from 9/15/17, 1:14 PM.” *Twitter*. Twitter, 15 Sep. 2017. Web. 22 Nov. 2017. <<https://twitter.com/katyperry>>.

⁵ Bieber, Justin. “Tweet from 11/21/13 9:03 AM.” *Twitter.com*. Twitter, 21 Nov. 2013. Web. 22 Nov. 2013. <<https://twitter.com/justinbieber>>.

⁶ Mark Twain cited here: http://sisu.typepad.com/sisu/2004/07/any_mark_twain_.html

would literally have to leap from foot print to foot print as we struggled to keep up with him and to walk exactly where he walked.

For us it was a game, but it reminds me of what it means to follow Christ. Because to follow Him means, by definition, to try to walk where He walked; to match His stride and to copy His journey; to put our feet in His footprints and to go where He went.

Which is no easy thing. Jesus' life was lived on the margins; reaching out to the least and placing no value on the things that our society deems so important: like wealth, power, and privilege. He was a religious reformer who angered the Temple authorities. He was a deeply faithful man who taught loyalty not to the state, but to the kingdom of God and thus angered the Roman authorities. He was a selfless man who embodied the mercy and steadfast love of God with everything He did, and thus gave His own life as a sacrifice for many.

How can we ever hope to reach His footprints with our own, short sinful human stride? Following Him; walking His path is definitely a challenge to each one of us.

In our New Testament reading this morning we heard the familiar account of Christ's crucifixion as told by Luke. In Luke's account alone, we are given details of the two criminals who were crucified alongside Jesus. One of the criminals challenges Jesus to save Himself and them. Likewise, those gathered at the foot of the cross challenge Jesus saying: if He is the messiah He will save Himself. Much like the figure of Satan who tempted Jesus in the desert earlier in the Gospel of Luke, these who would taunt Jesus on the cross have misconstrued what it means for Him to be king.

You may remember that Satan tempted Jesus with three things, but twice he actually challenged Jesus to demonstrate the power that Satan expected Jesus to exhibit saying "*if You are the son of God, turn these stones to bread...*" and "*if You are the son of God,*" throw yourself from a high place and let the angels catch You..." If you are the son of God. But Jesus does not give-in to Satan's petty taunts for deeds of power and at the end of the story we are told that Satan left Him until an opportune time.⁷

One might argue that this story at *the end* of Luke's gospel is that opportune time. Reminiscent of that encounter in the wilderness, Jesus again hears the voices of those who would challenge who He is and what it means to be the Messiah; the son of God. The religious leaders say, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Messiah of God, His chosen one!" The soldiers mock Him saying "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" And even one of the criminals crucified with Him derides Jesus saying "Are You not the Messiah? Save Yourself and us!" But like Satan earlier in Luke's gospel, these challengers have misunderstood what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, the son of God. He has shown them a model of kingship and divinity based not on power, but on mercy and self-sacrificial love. Where they expect Him to act with

⁷ Luke 4:1-13, NRSV

deeds of power to save Himself, Jesus instead prays for His persecutors saying, “forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.”

What does it mean to walk in the footsteps of a man like that? We get a glimpse from the second criminal crucified with Jesus that day. “Jesus,” he says, “remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” We don’t know what inspired such a statement of faith from this unknown sinner on a cross at Golgotha; maybe he had known Jesus before this day; maybe he had heard of Jesus’ teachings or born witness to Jesus’ acts of healing and tender mercy for the poor and the outcast; maybe he had never before seen Jesus but, was moved by the very presence of the divine in his midst. Whatever the reason, this man asks for Jesus to remember him in His kingdom when there seemed at that time, and in that place, to be precious little evidence that Jesus was heir to any kingdom at all.

To follow this King is to put one’s trust in Him and Him alone; even when doing so seems to defy what we know to be wisdom; even when to do so runs counter to what the world says is right.

And that is, of course, Luke’s point in telling the story this way. What we look for in a leader: power, and wealth and a willingness to make use of both; Jesus was not. He was a different kind of King. The question then for us today - as it was for the readers and hearers of Luke’s Gospel in the time of its writing - is “how do we follow a king like this?” And the answer is the same today as it was during Jesus’ journey on earth: to trust Him and to trust that what He did and what He taught is really what is best for us and for our community.

Simply put, we walk in His foot steps: we do the things He did, we learn the lessons He taught, and we live in the manner that He embodied.

We love God. We love our neighbors. We love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We use the gifts God has given us for the purposes to which God has called us; We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and welcome the homeless; we seek to forgive one another and let go of past hurts and old grudges; we work for justice for the oppressed; we cease judging one another; we repent of the things we have done to sin against God and one another. We share the gospel every day, using words only when necessary; we take up our crosses daily and go to work participating in the Kingdom that God is building.

Quoting Jesus’ words is easy. Learning what they mean is harder. Following the path He sets for us is even harder still. But that’s what it means to follow Jesus. And when we proclaim that Christ is our King we are making a commitment to do just that.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.