

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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JUNE 14, 2009



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Luke 9:18-27

"Following The One"

In the middle of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry there is a sudden turning point. From this moment on, the crowds decrease, the opposition grows, and an ugly confrontation lies ahead. The question "why would anyone want to kill a man like this?" begins to get an answer. The Gospel writers agree that this change happened just after the feeding of the 5000 - probably the largest crowd Jesus ever dealt with - and that the pivot moment had to do with the answers Jesus began to give to three questions: *Who was he? What did it mean to call him Messiah? What was the cost of following him?* Three vital questions, then and now, whether you have been "with him" for years, or are just starting out on the path of discipleship.

1) *Who Am I?*

Jesus asks the Twelve Apostles *"Who am I?"* The crowds think he is a prophet; Jesus wants to know what the Twelve think. His question is emphatic: *"You, who do you say I am?"* Everyone has to answer that question, sooner or later, because the answer determines so much.

If Jesus is a prophet, a teacher, a rabbi - well, he deserves some attention, his life is intriguing, his ethical teaching might be valuable. Plenty of people from the 1st century to the 21st century are comfortable with that. Maybe the most famous American example was Thomas Jefferson. Our third

President was a brilliant man, and he was sure that from the earliest stages of Christianity, Jesus' message had been distorted and abused by his followers and "the Church," especially through all the "supernatural" things attributed to him. He saw Jesus as "a wise man," a "sage." So he famously set out with scissors to reduce the New Testament to only those parts he felt sure reflected "the real Jesus." He finished up with less than 20% of the Gospels, and published them as *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (sometimes called "The Jefferson Bible") in around 1810. He said *"There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man."*

Jefferson lives on in many guises today, in almost all churches, among people who see Jesus as the great teacher who gave us the Sermon on the Mount and the Golden Rule. Among the problems with this Jesus, as you may already have figured out, are that it's evidently not the way Jesus saw himself, and there's no reason why anyone would follow this man at great cost to themselves, even to martyrdom!

Jesus the teacher and prophet just doesn't fit the historical evidence, as generations of scholars have discovered. But the Apostle Peter was given the insight - from above, according to other gospel accounts - to see Jesus as *"the Christ of God;"* the promised

Messiah of Israel, "*the One who was to come.*" The titles "Christ" and "Messiah" are Anglicized versions of the Greek and Hebrew words that mean "*the Anointed One.*" Anointing was an ancient symbolic act of pouring oil over someone's head as a sign that the Spirit of God was coming on that person in power so they could serve God in a special way. In ancient Israel, kings were anointed, priests were anointed, prophets were anointed. In church history, people being ordained were anointed, and in some churches and times, people getting confirmed were anointed.

Jesus was "The Anointed One." He claimed the title for himself; he was "*The One*" long before anyone put that title on Neo in *The Matrix*, or on now-President Obama when he was campaigning. There is no irony in Jesus' title: he was and is "The One."

2) *The Anointed One*

The next question is always "*What will The One do?*" What is he anointed for? Jesus was clear about that from the start: in his first public sermon in his home synagogue in Nazareth, he quoted Isaiah: "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners... sight for the blind... release for the oppressed.. the year of the Lord's favor.*" He claimed all that applied to him, and that's what he had been doing now for maybe 2 years.

But in response to Peter's assertion that he is indeed "*the Anointed One,*" Jesus announces something nobody had heard of or thought of before, something that threw Peter and the rest of the Twelve into utter confusion. Jesus said the Messiah was going "*to suffer, be rejected, be killed, and be raised to life again.*" Peter was aghast, and (according to Mark's Gospel) tried to argue Jesus out of such ideas. But Jesus was adamant. The Messiah

must suffer and die. This was God's plan, this was how he would ultimately deliver Israel and the world, this was Jesus' mission. He had come to die for his people, and to be raised again by the power of God for his vindication and theirs.

It was a strange moment. Their leader was going to die – almost deliberately, it seemed. Who wants to follow a leader who is going to die? Would they have to die too? John's Gospel says that when Jesus spelled this out, "*many of his disciples no longer followed him.*" Here was a test of faith! Now the sun was shining hot on the little plants growing from seed! Did they have the deep roots that would allow them to survive and grow? Or would their faith and their discipleship wither away?

It's still true. Some people who see Jesus headed knowingly for the cross turn away, and say they "don't believe in" all this blood and death and sacrifice and atonement. They prefer Jesus the teacher, thank you! But again, here is truth that is embedded in the historical evidence: that Jesus saw his Messiah-ship fulfilling the prophet Isaiah's vision of "*the Suffering Servant*" of God, the one who was "*despised and rejected... stricken by God and afflicted... pierced for our transgressions;*" and that "*by his wounds we are healed.*" Why follow a dying leader? Because his death is the gateway to delivering us all.

3) *What's A Disciple?*

So what does it mean to be a disciple of this "Anointed One"? Well you can guess that already. It means, among other things, to be prepared to suffer as he did; to be rejected, to feel under the sentence of death.

To follow Jesus means to "*take up our cross daily.*" That of course is a metaphor for saying "our life is not our own." It can mean that in a strange way, "the world is dead to

us and we to the world," even while we are fully alive and still growing in faith and love and vision and ability and achievement! That's paradoxical, but it comes from recognizing the truth in Jesus' warning that it's possible to "*gain the whole world and lose your own soul.*" He actually puts that in monetary terms to make clear where the danger lies; "where is the profit" if you "possess the whole world" but "forfeit your very life?"

There are many ways of being lured onto that path: the world offers us thousands of trade-offs. Cheat a little and make a big score! Pad your resume a little and get into a big-name college or a big-name corporation! Deceive your wife or husband or partner in exchange for the thrill of a lifetime! Cheat on your taxes and have more money left for yourself! Pay just a few dollars for the best high you ever had! You know, if you are old enough, where these things lead. You can guess, if you are younger but smart, how these stories turn out. Being exposed, being arrested, being fired, being divorced, becoming addicted - these may be just the first steps on the road to "losing your soul" or "losing your life;" of leaving the good path for the road to destruction. Don't go there!

So we have to "die" to all these things, internally; tell ourselves "there's no way I am going to sell my life, my eternal soul, that cheaply." If we are going to follow Jesus, we will sometimes have to say "no" to other things as well as "yes" to him. It's called "*denying yourself,*" and it's very unfashionable these days. But we can't be ashamed to do that; the rewards are infinitely greater than the cost. We have to find our identity in him: in serving him, and in being part of his people.

Who is he? He's *The One!* What does that mean? He's going to sacrifice himself for his

friends. How do you follow such a leader? Take up your cross and start walking. It won't always be easy, and some people decide the journey is not worth the effort. But once you have met him and heard him and trusted him, you know it's worth your very life to persevere in following him!

Let us pray...