

## **Following Along**

Menno Mennonite Church

March 21, 2021

**Purpose:** To claim the promise of God's work even in the face of apparent failure

**Message:** Discipleship is an invitation to follow God in all things, embracing God's way.

**Scripture:** John 12:20-33 (I will read); Jeremiah 31:31-34

**Synopsis:** Being a disciple is not always an easy task. So often we see our selves coming up short, missing some of what is promised, what is hoped for, what we long to see in our lives and in our world. We place effectiveness above faithfulness. Our efforts as an ongoing struggle against that which will never change, never resolve, and where hope is seemingly absent. We can look for new ways of doing things, even if they may not be the way of Christ. In these times where we feel as though we have reached the end of ourselves, and situations beyond redemption there remains the promise that the seed can and will flower yet again. We are invited into the ways of discipleship that make all things new.

John 12:20–30 (NRSV)

<sup>20</sup>Now

among those who went up to worship  
at the festival  
were some Greeks.

<sup>21</sup>They came to Philip,  
who was from Bethsaida in Galilee,  
and said to him,

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

<sup>22</sup>Philip went and told Andrew;

then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

<sup>23</sup>Jesus answered them,  
“The hour has come for the Son of Man  
to be glorified.

<sup>24</sup>Very truly, I tell you,  
unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,  
it remains just a single grain;

but if it dies,  
it bears much fruit.

<sup>25</sup>Those who love their life lose it,  
and those who hate their life—release their life-- in this world  
will keep it for eternal life.

<sup>26</sup>Whoever serves me must follow me,  
and where I am,  
there will my servant be also.

Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

<sup>27</sup>“Now my soul is troubled.

And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’?

No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.

<sup>28</sup>Father, glorify your name.”

Then a voice came from heaven,

“I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”

<sup>29</sup>The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder.

Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.”

<sup>30</sup>Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.

If there is one thing that humankind is good at, it is bureaucracy. I am not talking about the less intelligible arcane elements of government processes (that's a whole other level of suffering), but more the day-to-day rhythms that we use to organize and conduct the workings of our lives. If there is a way to routinize it, chances are we'll find it. My morning is pretty routine: snooze once on the alarm (never mind it is set to account for this), shower, shave, dress, eat, and make my way out the door. I even have the markers on the radio to let me know where and when I'm behind the clock. Barring some curve ball set us by the kids, it is fairly predictable and we keep doing the same old same old unless something else gets in the way. I am sure I am not the only one. Because this is how we like it: we like the routines and normalcies of our lives. It gives us an autopilot to reference and enhances that wonderful feeling that we are in control no matter what. We do this with our lives, our world our job. What's more we do it with our faith, normalizing the in and outs of the schedule of faith without a great deal of effort or even thought. We have our routines, the normalcy that just makes sense, and we keep getting on with it after that. We do what we do and don't give a great deal of additional thought.

I have become increasingly convinced the quintessential song of faith is not so much *Amazing Grace* with its articulation of who God is and what God does in our lives so much as it is the much more basic *Jesus Loves Me*. It is the most important because it does the most essential work of faith—to remind us in the midst of everything else that the love of God and the promises of God apply to us, and remind us that we are beloved of God. We need this because we with our inclination to set up a system to manage things no matter what, and it leads to the most fundamental temptations that we have—to think that we cannot possibly be good enough, faithful enough, pious enough, what ever enough to make the cut that we have placed between ourselves and God, demanding the best. And while it is never bad to demand something of ourselves and to embrace disciplines to our benefit, it cannot be at the cost of eroding the most basic, essential truth of the whole of faith: that Jesus loves us, God loves us and there is nothing in this world or the next that can change that, even if we fail to perform the tasks of following in a less than precise way. We try to see Jesus, and we go through the hoops that we set up for ourselves to get there, but often we fail to see Jesus because it is not the Jesus we expect to see. More on this in a few minutes.

Turning to the story here, it seems so ordinary—a request to see the master—but does not remain there. It all starts innocently enough. “I want to see Jesus”. It is a common enough

request these days to be sure. One the Phillip likely had heard a variation of any number of times today alone. Maybe it was strange accent—strangers in a strange land—that made things stand out. Perhaps it was the broader events of the last couple of days—the raising of Lazarus, the unflinching journey into the holy city of Jerusalem. These were big things. Symbols to be sure, whatever they mean. Phillip and the others had been talking about it around the clock, and it was just as perplexing now as it was a couple days ago when it was happening. It just does not make sense; how could any of this possibly fit together? Not that this is anything particularly new for Phillip. Ever since that day that Jesus showed up by the lake and invited him to follow him, the remarkable has become almost common day. Water to wine. Dinner with the formerly dead with Lazarus, now fully and completely alive. It keeps getting more and more amazing. Confusing, sure, but always amazing.

What we need to remember is the location of the story. For John this comes immediately *following* the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, a festival attended by Jews and Non-Jews alike (think of it as the YHWH fan club, if you will). It was the time for the temples to shine, for everything that is Jewish to be on display. But then the people get distracted by this bothersome Rabbi coming and making such a noise. Suddenly the crowds and the on lookers are no longer so interested in the workings of the Passover, and instead drawing the gaze of those near and far. The prophets had spoken of this universal attraction as a messianic quality. Isaiah 56 speaks of gathering all nations together; the prophecy quoted by Jesus in the other Gospels at this moment of the entry. We can add this to the long list of why Jesus was being watched increasingly closely—not because there was something intrinsically incompatible between Jesus and Judaism—that is something we have to be careful with especially in these weeks. Jesus didn't die because he was a bad Jew—far from it. He died because no system ever wants to get its foundational assumptions pushed to breaking, or to be upstaged at the wrong time, no matter what the label.

And then there is Jesus' response. In his last public teaching in John's Gospel, he speaks to his paradoxical best. *“Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”* It might be better thought of as “whomever is willing to start living their God life now will keep it eternally” as the translation broadly supports. It is only the seed the dies that bears fruit. And he is talking to you and to me. As comforting and familiar as these red-letter quotations are to us, we can never let them become so much part of our systems,

part of our way of being that we fail to hear with the disciples the incredible invitation that was theirs and is ours: There is life; good life, kingdom life to be had, but don't expect it to be on the terms that you expect or desire. The way of God is well beyond that, but the way of God still bears much fruit. In this turn toward Jerusalem, Jesus confirms that his destination was indeed the cross, something which his disciples have continually dismissed and disbelieved despite him telling them time and again. That is why you keep getting these asides of the disciples "remembering & understanding after the resurrection" what it all meant.

The disciples had come to see Jesus as we all come to see Jesus—with their expectations of who a messiah is and what a messiah does and why. They had their specific blindings to what they were encountering (and they had the benefit of voices from on high). We come looking for a Jesus who is ready to love us, but leave our world unspoken to, our ways well intact, extending us only happiness, and never asking us to come with him on the journey that would have us lose that which binds us on the chance of receiving something new on the other side.

Anna & Luke do not much care for meany daddy, but they are stuck with him all the same. The accusation of "but you made me cry" for calling them on something they were more than happily doing seems to be the highest treason meant for my instant and unconditional surrender. Somehow our telling them that we stop them from running to meet the mailman is more about depriving them from the pleasure of waving and smiling at Ken, our carrier, then it is about helping them realize that getting in the way of a moving vehicle is a universally bad idea. Most of the time when we get to this point, my response is "that's OK that you are mad a me right now. I can live with that—even your tears." Their expectations of what is fun don't match up with our expectations of what is safe, and they are still trying to grasp that there are things that we would tell them that are not meant to make them happy but are to do the more difficult impulses of loving them.

I think we struggle with that similar impulse in the case of Jesus. It is not enough for us to simply want to "come and see" Jesu, and to get the thrill of knowing someone up close. Jesus is bigger than that. We must have our ears unclogged, our vision corrected, our sense assaulted by the trauma that is Jesus' death and resurrection. As Jesus explains, we cannot avoid darkness and loss—even when we try, we fail. We do not hold onto life by systematically protecting it. We gain life that even on the other side of all the deaths we die there is life, eternal life, in this world and the next.

This is the most counter-intuitive, counter-cultural, incomprehensible thing about the gospel, but this is the nub of the whole thing. We are invited to die alongside Jesus. We are invited as disciples to move beyond just claiming Jesus as teacher and savior, but rather to emulate him in trusting that fruitfulness of purpose and the resurrection of this world is not ultimately our work and our responsibility but is rather the ongoing work of the resurrecting God that brings about fruitfulness and full flower even in those places that seem most dead and those situations that seem most beyond hope. We do this not to simply shed what needs to be shed or to expunge ourselves of unrighteousness in order to be made righteous. The invitation to paradox that is being made here is an invitation to the knowledge that it is in letting go of that would bind us up, that which would hold us back from, that which would keep us from being the complete people that God is meaning us to be, we will be able to grow into the complete people God has created us to be, allowing us to more fully bloom and experience life more fully. We have to be able to let go of the voice that urge to cling tightly to full control lest we fail, lest we fail to live up to all that is being asked of us. We are being invited here to die to that which would hold us back, those reigns of responsibility and control that we value so much. In doing that we step into faith of a God who invites us to a life that may not be what we want—the rainbow unicorns of happiness all the time—but the realistic work of trusting the life-giving God to make us whole, come what may.

In order to live fully and completely, a bit of death must come our way. A paradox to be sure. But one that calls beyond our comfortable assumptions to be the people of God and for God that we were created to be. This is the gracious call that invites us to follow, challenging us to change. May we die, and grow, and see God's fruitfulness in all things and all times.