

Fans or Followers

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 & Matthew 4:12-23
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
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1 Corinthians 1:10-18 (NIV)

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers [and sisters], in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹ My brothers [and sisters], some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹² What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. ¹⁶ (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel — not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. ¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Matthew 4:12-23 (NIV)

¹² When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. ¹³ Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— ¹⁴ to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: ¹⁵ "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶ the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." ¹⁷ From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

¹⁸ As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, ²² and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

Fans or Followers?

Someone named Kyle Idleman has written a very thoughtful essay titled "Why I'm Not a 'Fan' of Jesus." He begins by noting that, according to a recent survey, the percentage of Americans who claim to be Christian is somewhere north of 75 percent.

“Really?” he asks, “three out of four people are followers of Christ? Let’s see, if the population of the United States is about 311 million and 75 per cent are Christians that brings the number of Christians to somewhere in the neighborhood of 233 million. That’s a lot of Christians.”

In Idleman’s estimation, something about that percentage is off. Thus he goes on to say, “Because if there really are that many Christians, then why will some 35 million people in America go to bed hungry tonight, including 13 million children? If 75 percent of Americans are Christians, then why are there more than 120,000 children waiting to be adopted? The numbers don’t add up. Jesus said the evidence that someone is one of His followers is love. So 233 million?” says Idleman, “the evidence just isn’t there.”

“What’s the explanation for such a discrepancy?” he asks. Then he tells about an article he read a number of years ago about a group called, the “New Vegetarians.”

“These new vegetarians don’t eat meat — most of the time. One of them explained that she was a vegetarian, but she really liked bacon.” And so she ate it. “A vegetarian, by definition, is someone who doesn’t eat meat,” says Idleman. “Umm, yeah, but isn’t bacon a meat? Is it really accurate for her to identify herself as a vegetarian?” Then he adds that the discrepancy was solved by coming up with a new term to describe vegetarians who aren’t committed to abstaining from meat. They now identify themselves as “Flexitarians.”

“A Christian,” continues Idleman, “by definition, is a follower of Christ. So, I’m thinking that what might help make sense of the 233 million number is a new word to describe people who identify themselves as Christians, but have little interest in actually following the teachings of Jesus. Perhaps instead of ‘followers,’ it would be more accurate to call them ‘fans.’

“The word fan is most simply defined as, an enthusiastic admirer. And I think Jesus has a lot of fans these days. Some fans may even get dressed up for church on Sunday and make their ringtone a worship song. They like being associated with Jesus. Fans want to be close enough to Jesus to get the benefits, but not so close that it requires anything from them. They want a no-strings-attached relationship with Jesus. So a fan says, ‘I like Jesus, but don’t ask me to serve the poor. I like Jesus, but I’m not going to give my money to people who are in need. I like Jesus, but don’t ask me to forgive the person who hurt me. I like Jesus, but don’t talk to me about money or sex — that’s off limits.’

“Fans like Jesus just fine, but they don’t want to give up the bacon....”

Today’s reading from Matthew’s Gospel is about four men who were called by Jesus to be His disciples. They were not called to be fans of Jesus, but followers. Their names were Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, four fishermen. But this reading is also about you and me, because we have been called to be disciples as well! We also have been called to be followers and not fans! I’ll let you decided to which group you belong. But first let’s ask, what does it mean to be “a disciple of Jesus Christ”?

NOTICE, FIRST OF ALL, HOW ORDINARY THESE FOUR MEN WERE.

They had no formal education that we know of. Neither did they possess any particular personal attractiveness, or extraordinary talent of which we are aware. They were just ordinary fishermen. We often make the mistake of assuming that God calls only the most impressive, the most gifted, the most talented people. Indeed, that seems to be the exact opposite of what God does!

God comes to Moses with the summons to go tell Pharaoh to “Let my people go.” Moses responds, “Who am I that I should go to the Pharaoh?” Later Moses protests that he is too “slow of speech” to carry out such a mission (Ex. 3 and 4).

God comes to Gideon who would later be a great leader of God’s people, but Gideon responds, “My clan is the weakest in Mannaseh, and I am the least in my family (Judg. 6: 15).”

Even that most successful of all Israel’s kings, David, was flabbergasted by God’s call. “I’m only a poor man and little known,” replies David (I Samuel 18:23).

St. Paul tells us in I Corinthians, the first chapter, that God has deliberately chosen what the world considers foolish. Friends, St. Paul is talking about you and me!

God chooses ordinary people to do His work so that they will depend on His power and not their own. For this reason, says St. Paul, no one will ever be able “to boast in the presence of God.”

The late John McKay was for many years the coach of the University of Southern California Trojans. Later he was the coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the NFL. He was known as a superb football coach.

McKay once said that it is not the superstars who win most football games but average players giving their best.

I’m certain that a Hall of Fame coach like McKay understood the value of having players of a certain level of talent, but he also understood that many talented players never fulfill their potential because of a lack of desire and dedication.

In the play, Green Pastures, God asks Gabriel to recruit a leader and Gabriel asks in return, “Do you want the brainiest or do you want the holiest?” God answers, “Get me the holiest. I’ll make him the brainiest.”

And that is the way God works. Some of His most effective servants have been people with very modest résumés.

In a little town in the Swiss Alps there is a monument with two figures on it. One is a cultured scientist, the author of many books. The other is a poor Swiss peasant, an Alpine guide. Together they

had conquered a great mountain. The scientist's name made all of the newspapers. The guide was almost completely overlooked. But the monument that was erected contains both figures because the great scientist could never have made the ascent without his humble guide.

Beginning with the crude manger of Bethlehem no message is clearer in the New Testament than this one — Christian faith is the celebration of ordinary people who come to possess a very extraordinary power.

When you are asked to serve God in some capacity, don't talk yourself out of a great opportunity by saying, "I'm too old," or "I don't have enough education," or some other personal put-down. God can give you the ability! What He can't give you is the commitment, the dedication, the faithfulness. That must come from within. That is why God always prefers the holiest to the brainiest. That is why Christ prefers followers to mere fans. The first disciples that Jesus called were ordinary individuals.

AND NOTICE WHAT THESE ORDINARY INDIVIDUALS WERE CALLED TO DO. THEY WERE CALLED TO SPEND THREE YEARS OF THEIR LIVES IN THE PRESENCE OF JESUS.

A disciple is one who studies with a great teacher. This implies that those who follow Jesus need to grow. We do not blossom overnight into mature spiritual giants.

Dr. Dwayne Dyer asked in one of his books, "How do you distinguish between a flower that is alive and one that is dead?" Then he answers his own question: "The one that is growing is alive." He adds, "The only evidence of life is growth." So it is with the life of the spirit.

One prominent evangelist complained during the 1950s when churches were bursting at the seams that the church really wasn't growing; it was merely getting fat. That is, persons were coming into the church, but they were remaining spiritual infants. They were not growing in understanding and faith. "We are simply multiplying spiritual babies," this evangelist charged. The past half-century has borne that out. Many have fallen by the wayside. Many have proved to be people of shallow convictions. They have proven to be fans and not followers.

To be alive is to grow! In his second epistle Peter encourages us "to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18)."

Growth is why we come to church! The place most of us encounter Christ and learn about Him and grow in our spiritual walk is within these walls. The cry of a few years ago, "Jesus, yes; the church, no," simply is an illusion. Follow-up studies on persons involved in Christian groups not related to a local church over the past several decades back that up. It simply does not last. The ember removed from the fire soon grows cold.

Like every pastor I am astonished at times by the casual attitude many people have about their responsibilities to the church. I sometimes feel like the orchestra conductor who was quite upset over the fact that at every rehearsal at least one member of the orchestra was absent. At the final rehearsal

before a big concert he announced, “I would like to thank our first trumpet player. He was the only member of this orchestra who did not miss a rehearsal.”

The first trumpet player stood and bowed as the other members of the orchestra applauded. Then he said quietly, “It was the least I could do, considering I won’t be able to be at the concert tonight.”

I know how that orchestra conductor felt at that moment. Every pastor does.

The work of the church is so important! Our ministry to little children and to youth and to adults is so vital to the Kingdom of God! This is a place where disciples grow! This is where we are equipped for the work Christ has given us! The church deserves our best loyalty and service!

I’m reminded of a story about another orchestra that was giving a concert in a large church hall in England. The place was absolutely jam-packed.

Afterwards a casual member of that church where the concert was held flippantly asked the pastor of the church when the hall would be filled like that for a Sunday morning worship service. The pastor answered solemnly, “It will be filled when like that conductor I have eighty well-trained, committed and disciplined men and women to work with me.”

How the church needs that today. Eighty well-trained, committed and disciplined men and women could change a community, maybe even a nation. Jesus did it with twelve.

I heard recently about a man who was given the nickname, “Honest John.” It embarrassed him and he protested that he did not deserve it. “Couldn’t you call me, ‘Fairly Honest John?’” he asked.

That sounds like many of us, doesn’t it? We want to be ‘fairly committed’ in our service to Christ, ‘fairly committed’ to Sunday School and worship, ‘fairly committed’ to making our church what God has called it to be. Jesus called those original followers to spend three years in His presence as disciples, learners, students. It was not enough for them to be “fairly committed.” Christ was calling them to be completely committed. They needed to grow. So do we.

This brings us to the last thing to be said. These disciples were ordinary people just as we are. They were called not only to go with Jesus but also to grow with Him — just as we are as well. Here is the final thing.

THERE WOULD COME A TIME WHEN THEY WOULD NO LONGER BE CALLED DISCIPLES, BUT APOSTLES — THOSE WHO ARE SENT OUT TO PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS.

Disciples are those called to come. Apostles are those called to go. There needs to come a time when we move from being followers to being leaders.

Our church should never have any difficulty finding persons to teach Sunday School, or work with youth, or sing in the choir, or take on leadership positions, or serve in our stewardship campaigns, or make contacts in our community. There comes a time when mature Christian believers realize that it is time to move from being ‘ministered to’ to the work of ministry itself.

Perhaps that was part of why Jesus chose not to remain with His disciples physically. He wanted them to understand that now they had the privilege and responsibility of carrying on the work of God.

Remember that scene where Jesus asks Simon Peter three times, “Simon, do you love me?” Each time when Simon professes his love for Christ the Lord instructs Simon to “feed my sheep.” That is the message that’s carved in stone above the side entrance of our church. “Feed my Sheep.” That is the final step in following Christ. It is to feed Christ’s sheep. We need to appreciate that in the church today. We need to move beyond caring for ourselves to caring for others.

One of the most monumental works in all the world is the Great Wall of China. The mammoth man-made structure stretches eighteen hundred miles over mountains, plains and deserts. The Chinese built it to keep out barbarians, but for the Chinese themselves it became a barrier to progress. Isolated behind that wall from others they quit progressing as a people.

That can happen to us as individuals or as a church. Great things happen within the walls of this church. But if we never see ourselves as the apostoloi, those sent out in ministry to the world, we will stagnate and die in our own spiritual pilgrimage.

At the beginning of His ministry Jesus called four men — Simon Peter and his brother Andrew and two other brothers, James and John — to leave their nets and follow Him. He called them not to be fans, but to be followers. These were four ordinary men, but God did extraordinary things through them.

The first part of their pilgrimage was spent in the fellowship of Christ and other believers in order that they might grow to spiritual maturity as Christ’s disciples. But there came a time when in order to continue their growth they discovered that they must become teachers, missionaries, leaders of local churches, and servants both of the Word and the world. That is our calling as well. To move beyond being a fan to being a follower of Jesus Christ. May God bless each one of you in your ministry. Amen.

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