

We Are Witnesses
Matthew 3:13-17 and Acts 10:34-39a
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
January 12, 2020
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What does it mean to follow? Does it simply mean to walk behind? I think of the children's game "Follow the Leader." Following the leader didn't just mean going on the same path or in the same general direction, but it also meant doing what the leader was doing. And depending on your personality, you may have loved that game – maybe you especially loved being a leader who was as goofy as possible just to watch the others who were playing – or you may have dreaded the game and been that kid who sulked at the end of the line too embarrassed to spin like a top or leap like a frog even though the leader was doing just that.

Following is about more than just being a shadow. It is about more than admiring someone from a distance. To truly follow someone, we are called to be like them, to witness to them and to do this in both word and deed.

So, maybe the question – if we are going to put all this effort into it – is what draws us to someone in the first place. In the case of those of us who call ourselves Christians, what draws us to Jesus? Why would we choose to follow him anyway? And if we are following where will it take us? What will we look like along the way?

To answer these questions – what better place to look than to the stories of Jesus?

So, today, which is the Sunday of the year when the church remembers Jesus' baptism, we heard Matthew's telling of the baptism story. We also heard a section from Acts where Luke, the writer of Acts, was telling the story of the first Gentile conversion in the early church. This is the story many of us are familiar with about Cornelius – a god fearing Gentile – and Peter encountering each other thanks to messages from the Holy Spirit. It is through this encounter

that Peter comes to the conclusion that Gentiles are just as much part of God's family as Jewish people. And the reading that Bob shared with us today was part of Peter's witness to this.

So, when we look at these two texts, what do we learn about Jesus?

Well, in the baptism story we first learn that Jesus is humble enough to be baptized by someone else. We also hear the words of God's claim on Jesus – Jesus is a child of God and more than even just that, he is loved.

The baptism story is pretty simple in what it tells us, because when Matthew is relating it, he is telling the events of that day. But, when we turn over to Acts and listen to what Luke tells us Peter said we get a little more about the impact of Jesus' baptism. In verse 38 we hear Peter say, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; ... he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed with the devil, for God was with him."¹

"He went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed."

Isn't that at the heart of who Jesus was? While we live in a time when Christianity is two thousand years old, is well established as a religious organization of mammoth size, the reality is that Jesus was far less about calling people to right belief or to organizational membership than he was about calling people to right action and to the building up of the community.

He didn't spend time proving to people who he was and rarely in the stories we hear in the Gospels is he even talking about himself. Yes, he talks about and points people to God. Yes, he invites people to be participants in creating the world God intended. But he rarely did that through declaration, or through member gathering, or through a listing of right beliefs.

Instead, Jesus fed those who were hungry. He healed those who were hurting whether it was physical pain, emotional pain, or the pain of being cut off from the community. He built

¹ Acts 10:38, NRSV.

relationships with those who were not like him and welcomed into even his inner circle those who had deep and abiding faults. He met people where they were, encountered them in the midst of both their needs and their giftedness, and invited them to always become better, to find ways to reflect the love of God more clearly.

Maybe this picture I saw on Facebook the other day is one way to sum up what following Jesus means. It reads, “This year I want to be more like Jesus: Hang out with sinners, upset religious people, tell stories that make people think, choose unpopular friends, be kind, loving and merciful, take naps on boats.”²

Friends, on this Sunday when we remember the baptism of Jesus, we don’t just remember *his* baptism. We don’t just look back on the story of a day in which John and Jesus met at the Jordan and the heavens opened up with a divine declaration. Rather, this story and the reality of Jesus’ life call us back to who we claim to be as Christians.

While not every one of us in the room is baptized, the majority of us have been. And so, we are called to remember that our baptismal experience is not about getting our name on a list of those welcomed into heaven as if we drew a “get out of jail free card” while playing Monopoly. Our baptismal, or for those in other traditions, confirmation covenants are about living in the ways of Jesus. When we said “yes” then we said that we wouldn’t just shadow Jesus occasionally or admire him from afar, but that we would truly walk in his ways and do what he did.

So, when is the last time you ate with a stranger?

When is the last time you defended someone who had been cut off from community even when it was a great risk to you?

² Borrowed from Amy Gopp Vigne’s Facebook page, posted January 10, 2020.

When is the last time you befriended someone who had been named a sinner, an outcast, unworthy?

When did you last give up something that really mattered to you?

When did you speak up because you knew it was right even though it was going to make someone in authority upset?

When did you last challenge someone to look at things in a different way?

And if you've been busy doing these lately, then I'll even ask – when is the last time you got to take a nap on a boat...because you deserve it!

Friends, we are not Christians only because we admire Jesus. But we have taken on this name because we have made a commitment to live like him, to witness to him. And while we won't do this perfectly at every opportunity, our baptismal commitment is to keep trying.

We are called to live like Jesus.

We are called to witness to him, not just by the labels we apply to ourselves or by the fact that our cars sit in the church parking lot on Sunday mornings, but we are called to witness to him in the ways we live, in the choices we make, in the interactions we have, in the risks we take for the good of others.

This is no small thing. The commitment that is asked of us is no small commitment. And yet what better way than this to choose to spend the year ahead...even the lifetime ahead? What better way to live than as those who love as Jesus loved and who work alongside him, as witnesses to him, in the building up of God's kin-dom?

May it be so.