

June 8, 2023

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A FOLLOWER?

As I have lamented before, many rich words have been diluted or diverted in popular usage. "Awesome" and "love" come to mind. Often, such word devaluation is merely sad. But it is a far more serious matter when it happens to weighty words used in the Bible, that may not carry the same clout when read through a contemporary lens. Take the word, "follow."

To "follow" in today's social media context, for example, has little to do with the dictionary definition: "to accept the leadership of another; to travel behind or pursue another." As one online source explained, "those you follow on Facebook are people of interest to you, though they're outside your circle of real-life relations."

Portuguese soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo reportedly has the most Facebook followers, an astounding 163 million. Presumably, most of his followers are far outside his circle of real-life relations, have never seen him in person and don't know what he stands for; they just find him talented and interesting. A fictional buffoon called Mr. Bean reportedly has more than 136 million followers. It's a cinch that they are actually following him nowhere.

But long, long before there were followers in the impersonal, social media sense, there were 12 Hebrew peasants who became actual followers of an unlikely leader named Jesus, who "had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire Him" (Isaiah 53:2).

Although Jesus never left his tiny territory, sought no publicity, was hated by many, and was put to death two thousand years ago, today

He has an estimated 2.6 *billion* followers worldwide, known as Christians.

But following Jesus is nothing like following a soccer idol. So when we see Jesus' repeated call to "follow me" in the Bible, we need to give his words the full weight they bore in that day. His "follow me" did not mean "Look in on me, anonymously, from afar." It meant, "Come to me, now. Walk with me, learn from me. Then, go and do likewise."

He invited fishermen Peter and Andrew to, "'Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.' At once they left their nets and followed him" (Matthew 4:19). Likewise, James and John "left their father Zebedee in the boat...and followed him" (Matthew 4:22). When Jesus bid the tax collector Levi, "Follow me", he "got up, left everything, and followed him" (Luke 5:27–28).

As in every era, some first century people thought Jesus asked too much of his followers. For example, when Jesus invited an interested young man to leave his lavish lifestyle behind and "follow me", the young man "went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (Matthew 19:22). When Jesus said his followers must consume his body and blood in Holy Communion, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (John 6:66).

But whether people followed Jesus or not, they knew this: to follow Him meant a life-changing commitment. Trailing along as an interested spectator was not the same. This is true for his followers today, too.

He desires a genuine relationship with each one, not a distant, cyber attachment: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). And while He may not ask us to leave our occupation or lifestyle to follow Him, it could and does happen.

Always truthful, Jesus made it clear that following Him is not about adding some pious touches onto our self-centered life, but about undergoing an extreme makeover, spiritually: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

If we truly follow Jesus, He is not only inside our circle of real-life relations, He is the very center of it. If we follow Him as He lovingly asks, He is not just a person of interest to us, but the one whose leadership we gladly accept, the one we eagerly travel behind, the one we pursue wholeheartedly every day.

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux