

July 2, 2017

Matthew 10:34-39: **“Come, Follow Me!”**

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Way back in 1970, John Denver released his song "Follow Me" on an album titled: "Take Me To Tomorrow." In the song are these words: "Follow me where I go, what I do and who I know, make it part of you to be a part of me. Follow me up and down, all the way and all around, take my hand and say you'll follow me." Prior to performing this song on *The Tonight Show* in 1974, Denver said he wrote it for his wife Annie whom he had to leave behind when he was touring early on in his career because he couldn't afford to take her with him. Denver was expressing his deep desire for his wife to always be with him.

By 1982, things had considerably changed as Annie battled John over the division of property during their divorce proceedings. He became so enraged with his estranged wife that he tried to choke her. He then took a chainsaw to their marital bed and sawed it in half. So much for the song, "Follow Me." Following someone is a wonderful thing when, for the most part, "all appears to be right with the world!" But, when things aren't going well, look out! Who really wants to go along for that ride?

I would suspect that you have heard of the expression "through thick and thin." To stay with someone or something "through thick and thin" is to be there whether times are good or bad. Ronald Reagan was sworn in as president on January 20, 1981 and had this to say: "Howard Baker ... told me on the steps of the Capitol, at the time of the inaugural, 'Mr. President, I want you to know I will be with you through thick.' and I said, 'What about thin?' and he said, 'Welcome to Washington.'"

Sad to say, this kind of thinking is really not only found in Washington among the politicians, but it is found in Jerusalem among the Christians. The apostle John writes:

Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward." Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times."

Of course, we know the rest of the true account don't we? Shortly thereafter, Peter is swearing up and down that he doesn't even know the man! Peter was just fine when things were "thick," but not when things were "thin."

Our sermon hymn for this morning says: "'Come, follow Me,' the Savior spake, 'All in My way abiding; Deny yourselves, the world forsake, Obey My call and guiding, O bear the cross, whate'er betide, Take My example for your guide.'" Or, Jesus says in our gospel lesson:

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of

me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Matthew 10:34-39).”

Those words are really intense. Jesus does not come to bring peace. The use of a sword is a brutal image. Generally speaking, there isn't anything more important down here than the family relationships that ultimately lead back to ourselves - to much of our identity. Even the ones that we love the most pose a threat when they say: “Choose me and my ways rather than Jesus and his ways.” That hits our identity hard as we strive to please ourselves by pleasing others. It seems that the whole quest down here is to keep the family peace and keep ourselves content and happy in all things. But Jesus says “no” to all of that, when it comes to a choice between our old identity in sin, and the new one we have received through his death and resurrection.

Having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we have a new identity - a new name! Jesus is the revelation of the Father. The Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son bears witness concerning Christ and touches us with his death and resurrection. If you would know God, and by his teaching learn about yourself, then your eyes must be opened to who Jesus is, his death and resurrection, and all that is to be said concerning your relationship with him. He is the truth, and when that truth is placed upon us in Word and Sacrament, so that we are declared to be the children of God, it changes who we are and what we do. Everything that would get in the way of our new identity, whether it be familial relationships or what we might personally want, is supposed to be finally silenced in the presence of him who is our everything. This then is true peace.

As our groom, he sweeps us off of our feet! Having defeated sin, death, and the dragon, he comes to give everything in a kingdom that he has prepared for us from the foundation of the world! His forever objective is to wipe away the tears from our eyes, tears that we have made for ourselves, and then satisfy us with good things. The eternal heaven is full of eternal possibilities that are in keeping with true love and a peace that passes all understanding. The beginning of this understanding is for now understood in the full extent of God's love for us, that he gave his one and only Son to live a perfect life and die for our sins in order that we may be given all things. And, if we have the promise of all things in him, even possessing it now by faith, then whatever is opposed to this must be rebuked and even rejected. One Lutheran commentator writes (Jeffrey A. Gibbs):

Because the issue is the identity of Jesus and faith in him . . . the disciple knows there is no middle ground. Strangely, if a Christian were to long for the old way of life and cave in to family pressures to reject Christ and his work, he would thereby lose the only real life there is: eternal life with God through Jesus (10:39). Paradoxically, when a Christian accepts the sword, carries the cross, and suffers the loss of his former relationships and status - perhaps even giving up his bodily life (10:28) - because he clings in faith to Jesus, that believer will discover that he has found real life forever.

Again, Jesus says: “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it!”

When we lose our lives to receive his life, sufferings, death and resurrection, we are truly on a different course. We follow him where he goes, what he does and who he knows, and we do become a part of him and he is a part of us. We follow him up and down, all the way and all around when he takes us by the hand. All that is his, he gives to us - and that's everything. And who wouldn't want to follow him when you understand all that he has done and gives to us in his forever kingdom? But, for now, we also need to understand that there is a cost of following Jesus. The "thick" is only now by faith, and is to be fulfilled in the future. In the meantime, the road that we travel with our groom is to follow in his footsteps. And if you examine his footsteps, you discover that we shall travel through the "thin." Jesus says in the gospel of Luke:

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

"Come, Follow Me!" may not seem all that inviting when you consider the words of Jesus. But, like a groom and a bride who are madly in love with each other, and can see through it all to the end that blossoms into forever, it is worth every step of the way. As our sermon hymn states: "Then let us follow Christ, our Lord, And take the cross appointed And, firmly clinging to His Word, In suffering be undaunted, For those who bear the battle's strain The crown of heav'nly life obtain."

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott