

“What Does It Mean to Follow Jesus?”

What does it mean to follow Jesus?

That was the name of a song I remember teaching in Vacation Bible School many years ago.

And it's the question our text puts before us today.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? And are you his follower?

The “letter” to the Hebrews is addressed to a community where faith is slipping.

Not faith in terms of belief, but in terms of action.

Not faith in the sense of knowing who Jesus is, but faith in the sense of sharing who Jesus is.

Not faith meaning personal belief, but faith meaning public witness.

Some of the Hebrews have decided that the cost of being a follower of Jesus is just too high.

Are you a follower of Jesus?

Last week at Sunday Night Alive Movie Night we watched a film called “The Insanity of God”.

It was a powerful film and there wasn't time to discuss it, plus there were some who missed it,
so we'll be showing it again next Sunday at 3:00 in the Lounge.

But this morning I want to share just one of the stories from it with you.

It was in communist Russia that a man began reading a smuggled Bible to his children.

A neighbor found out and asked if he could come and listen, too.

More neighbors came and the illegal house church grew to 475 members.

It was then that the authorities arrested the man and placed him in prison.

Every morning he faced the East and in a loud, strong voice he sang a hymn of praise to Christ.

The other 1500 prisoners railed against him, flinging anything they could find, including human excrement at him.

The guards beat him mercilessly.

But every day of every wk of every mo of every yr for 17 yrs he sang that morning hymn of praise.

The guards tried for years to break him.

Finally one day they dragged a woman past his cell, calling her by his wife's name,

and within his hearing they tortured her for days and finally killed her.

They told him if he did not renounce his faith his children would be next.

The broken man agreed to sign a document renouncing his faith the next day.

But the next day when the guards arrived he no longer looked broken.

Smiling he said he would NOT denounce his faith because God had shown him in a dream

that his wife and children were alive and were praying that he would be faithful to Christ.

The next day the guards came and told him he was going to his death.

As they dragged him from his cell, a sound began – one voice singing, and then another, and then another,

until all 1500 prisoners were facing the East & singing the hymn of praise they had heard the man sing every day.

The guards were too afraid to kill him and soon the man was released from prison.

Why had God allowed him to be imprisoned and tortured for 17 years?

Maybe so that the lives of 1500 prisoners could be changed.

Maybe so that the lives of the guards who beat him could be changed.

Maybe so that his story could change countless lives – like yours and mine.

Are you a follower of Jesus?

One of the things that I've learned in the past few years

is that it's the people who are in need who have the strongest faith.

It's among those who are persecuted, those who are oppressed, those who suffer injustice,

that you hear the moving testimonies to the boundless power of God.

It's among those who have suffered excruciating pain or catastrophic illness or overwhelming grief,

that you often encounter the deepest faith.

It's among those who have lost jobs or homes or the means to survive

that you often find the stories of signs and wonders and miracles.

Are you a follower of Jesus?

I have come to believe that perhaps the main reason for the decline of mainline Protestantism is the relative freedom and safety, comfort and affluence, and power and privilege that the vast majority of us enjoy. By and large our lives are fine, good, comfortable. Unless we're in some unusual crisis, we don't need God to get through the next hour or day or week.

And so I give thanks and praise to God for the little bit of suffering I've had because it's been enough to make me hunger and thirst for a deeper relationship with God. I had everything – a husband & children, a house & car, a job & income, comfort & safety, and the power and privilege that comes with my race and class and education. I had everything and yet a biochemically based depression caused an intense enough suffering that caused me to reach out to God who met me in a way I never expected. I give thanks and praise to God for the lack, the need, the pain that let me to receive far more than the healing I sought, that set me on a path of faith and life that is richer than I ever dreamed possible, that has brought me a peace, a hope, a faith, a love & a joy beyond anything I ever imagined.

Are you a follower of Jesus?

The writer of Hebrews explains why Jesus, the creating and redeeming and sustaining power of God incarnate in human form, had to suffer. Suffering was how Jesus was made perfect. Suffering was the way to glory and honor for Jesus. Suffering was the price for his inheritance. And by Jesus following the path from suffering to deliverance, from debasement to glory, from crucifixion to resurrection, he became the pioneer who leads us along that same road.

So let me ask you, are you a follower of Jesus?

Are you willing to tell someone about Jesus? Are you willing to risk ridicule, suffer shame, hazard harm?

In a survey of a major Christian denomination it was discovered that 90% of lifelong members had never once told anyone about Jesus. And that's why the church is dying. If we don't follow Jesus, and if we don't invite others to follow, the church will die.

Are you a follower of Jesus? Have you needed to follow? Have you wanted to?

If not, then I hope that there will be some need, some lack, some motivation for you to turn to the one who creates and redeems and sustains you, to the one from whom you come and to whom you go, to the one who is the way, the truth and the life,

Are you a follower of a Jesus? I hope so!

Because there is something that goes far beyond the material comforts of this life, something that surpasses all the people and possessions and particulars of your life situation, something that is so much more satisfying than anything else on earth. And that something is an ever deepening relationship with the all-powerful God who will love you no matter what.

The writer of Hebrews understood that there is no joy without sorrow, no freedom without bondage, no release without suffering, resurrection without crucifixion

Are you a follower of a Jesus? Are you following the pioneer of our faith through suffering to glory? Because that's the only path there is.

So I hope you will understand when I wish you a little suffering this week – not too much, but enough to remind you of your need for God, enough to push you closer to Christ, enough to open you to the transforming presence and power of the Spirit.

And with that suffering, let me offer this blessing from the Apostle Paul:

May you rejoice in your sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

May you rejoice in your sufferings, knowing that despite the pain and grief and sorrow, there is nothing better than following Jesus. Nothing better in all the world. **Amen**