

Follower or Fan?
Luke 14:252-33 and Philemon 1-21
September 9, 2007

I saw an ad on TV yesterday, it's been on several times in the last week, a young woman and her husband are having an argument, and she flees the room in tears. Suddenly there's a winding path marked with stones and she follows it into the woods and out into a field – there's blue sky, puffy white clouds, green grass and happy people laughing and hugging each other. It looks like some kind of hippie love-in. And then there's a voice over that says if you're looking for something that's missing in your life, come to the United Methodist Church, with our open doors, open hearts, and open minds.

The ad just forgot to mention one thing. Jesus. And maybe one other thing – discipleship. But that's the kind of advertising that gets people to church these days, I guess. We don't demand anything of you, we're here to help you to realize yourself and meet your needs; we want you to be happy. Will Willimon quotes one cynical clergy person who summed up this kind of advertising with, “Self-centered, whining Yuppies of the world – have we got a church for you!”¹

But, what would we have our UM spinmeisters say? What sort of TV ad would even attempt to portray today's encounter with Jesus?

The gospel text begins by saying “large crowds were traveling with him.” Jesus is becoming popular with the crowds; they're following him around, and hanging on his every word. Sort of a first century Joel Osteen. But then, right there when he has them eating out of his hand, when he's at the height of his popularity, he says: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” Obviously he did not have the benefit of our United Methodist Public Relations Department. And before the disciples can whisk him away, he goes further – “If you won't carry a cross, you can't walk with me. Anybody who begins to build a tower without counting the cost runs the risk of looking stupid when he runs out of brick and can't finish the tower. Any king who goes to war without first considering whether or not he has the troops to win the war, may look dumb as he begs for peace. Count the cost. One more thing – you can't be my disciple if you don't give up everything you own.” Probably after that sermon, the crowds that followed him got a great deal smaller. Nowhere in there does Jesus say he want to make people happy or fulfilled or respected or loved. Nowhere.

It makes you wonder, doesn't it – can anybody every really do as Jesus commanded that day? Keep that question in mind as we turn to Paul's letter to Philemon. Unlike Paul's other letters that were to be read publicly in churches, this letter was written privately to a single person. And that's why I like it maybe better than some of Paul's formal, public letters. This letter is Christianity one-on-one, it is reality discipleship.

Philemon was led to a belief in Christ by Paul himself during his stay in Colossae, and Paul considers himself to be Philemon's father in the faith. Now Paul is in prison, perhaps in Ephesus, and has also become the father in faith to Onesimus, a slave who has

run away from his master Philemon. Reading between the lines there is probably guilt on both sides leading up to Onesimus' running away. It sounds as if Philemon might not have been the most agreeable of slaveholders, and if Onesimus, tired of his mistreatment, might have taken off one day with some of his master's money or other possessions, even though he knew that the punishment for running away was death.

There's all kinds of speculation about how Onesimus found Paul, some think that perhaps he sought Paul out, hoping that Paul could put in a good word for him – maybe with Philemon because of their shared faith, maybe with the Romans because Paul is a Roman citizen. But having met Paul, Onesimus hears for himself the gospel message, the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Lord of the world, the one who was crucified and raised. And Onesimus' heart is warmed and he comes to faith in Christ. Paul is now his father in the faith too.

He's caught in the middle between these two men whom he loved. Paul naturally wants to effect a reconciliation between his two spiritual sons. And so he writes a letter to the first son, the one who has all the worldly, secular power. He knows he could exert spiritual power of his own, and as an apostle of Jesus Christ command Philemon to receive back into his household the runaway slave. "I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty," he says. But instead, he appeals to everything that binds Philemon to him. They are friends, partners in the gospel, believers in Christ in a part of the world – today's Western Turkey -- where there were probably only one or two hundred Christians at the time.² And so he writes, "I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love." Their mutual love and respect for one another and now Paul's love for Onesimus, whom he calls "his heart," causes him to write this very personal letter.

And he asks a lot of Philemon; he asks him not only to receive back this runaway, but to treat him as a brother in Christ, saying that if indeed Onesimus has wronged Philemon, Paul will personally bear the responsibility for his debt. Paul concludes his letter with a cheerful promise to visit soon, perhaps a not so subtle hint that he's going to be checking up on how the relationship is going.

Onesimus himself is the bearer of Paul's letter to Philemon. His new relationship with Christ means that he must make right his relationship with his owner. His future—his very life—hangs in the balance. How will Philemon respond? Will he respond as a law-abiding Roman citizen and a slave holder with a reputation to uphold in the community? You know the neighbors are all wondering what he's going to do to restore his honor that has been shamed by this ultimate disrespect. Or will he respond as a Christian, knowing himself to be a debtor, and welcome his once slave, now brother in Christ, back into the fold and the protection of his family? I imagine he'd heard Paul say more than once, that in Christ "there is no longer Jew, or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all . . . are one in Christ Jesus." Had he taken it to heart?

It is decision time. Is Philemon going to be a Roman or a Christian? What is his fundamental identity? Citizen or disciple? We don't know the answer. It's obvious what Paul wants. He wants Philemon to take Onesimus back and to give him his freedom. He knows it will be costly. It will be difficult, painful, embarrassing and humiliating for both men, for Onesimus to go back and for Philemon to accept him. It all depends now on how they see themselves -- as master and slave or as brothers in Christ.

If we only had this one little letter from Paul, we would know a whole lot about what discipleship looks like. It reveals what Jesus was talking about that day when it sounded like he'd put his foot in his mouth. It is about making the decision to love and to be reconciled; it is deciding to tear down dividing walls and build new relationships based on a fundamental change in identity, it is to follow Christ instead of culture.

To be a follower of Jesus Christ in those early years was not easy. It was radically counter cultural. And as lives and communities were transformed by Christianity, that transformation came with a cost. Friends of early Christians like Philemon were offended and thought they'd lost their minds; family members were scandalized; government officials were outraged. In one story of early Christianity, it is told that Vibia, an aristocratic young woman who lived in Carthage, was imprisoned because of her Christian belief, and her father came to see her to talk her out of her foolishness. But she said to him, "Do you see that water jar in the corner?" Her father said, "Yes, I do." "Can it be called any other name than a water jar?" she asked. "No, he answered, "it is a water jar." And she replied, "Well, so too, I cannot be called anything other than what I am. I am a follower of Christ. That is who I am."³

We like to call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ, but are we really? None of us is subject now to persecution for our faith. We are not under death threats because of what we believe. But that does not mean that God is not calling each of us to live a committed life. To follow him is to acknowledge this commitment. How deep is our Christian identity? Is it just one of the many aspects of who we are? Or does it cause us to act differently from other people or to treat other people differently? Does it make us braver? If someone looked at you or me, what would they see reflected? Would they somehow see the self-emptying love of Christ that which perhaps Paul was attempting to imitate when he said to Philemon, "If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account."?

Clarence Jordan, the founder of the Koinonia community in Americus, GA, said that Jesus has many admirers but few followers. And he had to look no further than his own brother for confirmation of that sad fact. Clarence asked his brother, who later was to become a State senator and Georgia Supreme Court Justice, to represent Koinoinia in a legal action. But his brother declined because to do so would be the kiss of death for his political aspirations. When Clarence reminded him that they'd both joined the church together, and both had said "yes" to the question "Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior," his brother said, "I follow Jesus, up to a point." And Clarence asked, "Could that point by chance be the Cross?" And his brother said, "That's right. I follow him to the cross, but I'm not going to get on the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified." And Clarence responded, "Then I don't believe you are a disciple of Jesus. You're an admirer. . . but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to and tell them you're an admirer but not a disciple."⁴

To follow Christ is to be more than an admirer. It is to go deep and to offer ourselves sacrificially both as individuals and as a community. You may not realize it, but it is discipleship that causes some of you to give up your Saturdays and come over here to Park cars for God. And it's discipleship that causes some of the choir members to give up a free weekend to go to a choir workshop. And it's discipleship that caused the United Methodist Women to make gift baskets and bake cakes to benefit Our Daily Bread.

If you're here this morning because you think believing in Jesus will make life easier, or will solve all of your problems, then I hate to disappoint you, but Jesus won't do that. He is not in the business of meeting our needs; indeed, he appears intent on giving us needs we would not have had, had we not met him.⁵ His message is not for the faint hearted. Discipleship is demanding and it is costly and it will – guaranteed -- sometimes, maybe often times, puts us at odds with our families, our friends, our culture. But Jesus doesn't want just a part of us. He wants all of us, just as he gave all of himself for us. And for each one of us there will come a time when we have to decide, just as Philemon had to decide about Onesimus, am I an admirer or a disciple, a follower or just a fan?

By the way, legend has it that Onesimus went on to become a bishop of Ephesus. So I guess we know what Philemon decided. But what about us?

¹ William H. Willimon, "Spin City Jesus," *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2004, p. 42.

² N. T. Wright, "Philemon Then and Now," A sermon given in 2003.

³ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, NY: Random House, 2003, pp. 11-12.

⁴ Quoted in James W. Mclendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*. Nashville: Abindgon Press, 1974, pp. 127-28.

⁵ Willimon, p. 43.