

First Presbyterian Church
Life Lessons from Luke: Following
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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2 Kings 2:1-8; Luke 9:51-62

I want to begin this morning with a Jeopardy moment. So here is the answer, Cristiano Renaldo, Khaby Lame, Barack Obama, and Pewdiepie? What is the question? Any guesses? What they have in common is that they have the most followers in a particular branch of social media. Cristiano Renaldo has 456 million followers on Instagram. Khaby Lame has 142 million followers on Tik-tok. Barack Obama has 132 million followers on Twitter. And, Pewdiepie...yes that is his handle and he simply plays and talks about video games, has 111 million followers on YouTube. That's a lot of people following each of them. However, they all pale in comparison to the followers of Jesus. Jesus has about 2.6 billion followers, or as Wikipedia puts it, adherents. The question we might want to ask ourselves this morning is what is the difference between being a follower of someone on social media and a follower of Jesus? Perhaps the easiest way to understand this is to compare them to a follower of someone on social media is to be interested in their thoughts, insights, abilities, or music...or perhaps what they wear. To be a follower of Jesus, if we see being a follower through the lens of scripture, is to move from believing to being. Let me say that again, being a follower of Jesus is about moving from believing to being.

We can understand this movement from believing to being by understanding a bit more about who Jesus is on a fundamental level. On the most fundamental level, Jesus is the embodiment of God with us, and us with God. What I mean by this is that Jesus did not simply live as a great teacher or rabbi, which he was. He did not live simply as a purveyor of secret knowledge about how to get to heaven, which he did possess. He did not simply live as a healer, which he certainly was. He did not simply live as an apocalyptic miracle worker. Jesus was all these things, but more importantly Jesus was the literal embodiment of God with us, and us with God. This is the concept that Jesus was both fully divine (**God with us**) and fully human (**us with God**). And so, when the scriptures talk about Jesus' desire to have people follow him, it was not just about his teaching, healing, or miracles. Following was about the transformation of human beings from those who believed in Jesus, to those who embodied us with God to become fully human as God designed us to be; meaning we are those who live in full communion with God, and it is the Spirit that empowers and directs all we that are and do. It is moving from believing to being.

I bring up the concept of following because it is at the heart of this section of Luke in which Jesus tells his followers several important things about following. First, he shows them that following is corrective. In other words, following Jesus, moving from believing to being, is intended to correct patterns of believing that are incompatible with being fully human. We see this in the strange story of James and John wanting to rain fire and brimstone on the Samaritans who would not welcome Jesus into their homes. While that might seem odd to us, we need to remember that Jews and Samaritans hated each other. They despised one another. So when Jesus is cutting across Samaritan territory and was refused the kindness that ought to have been shown to strangers, it was not a great leap for the disciples' hatred of Samaritans to show itself. Jesus however rebukes them. Jesus rebukes them because he understands that he has come to give his life for the whole world and not just for those who are nice to him. He understands that Samaritans are children of God deserving of God's love and grace, and that they have reasons to hate Jews since Jews under the Maccabees destroyed their temple and oppressed them. Thus, following is intended to correct those beliefs and actions that keep us from experiencing our true humanity.

The second thing Jesus wants his followers to understand is that following is continual. This is the focus of another odd story in Luke in verses 57 and 58. *“As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”* In other words, following Jesus is not something someone does for a while, and then one settles down in one’s den or nest. Following Jesus is instead a journey without an end...there is no place to finally stop and lay one’s head as if the journey is over. In some ways one could liken this to professional athletes who still have coaches. NBA stars have shooting coaches. Pro golfers have swing coaches. Major League Baseball players have hitting and pitching coaches. These pros understand that they are on a journey to become better and better at their craft. They understand that there is room for continual improvement. The same is true with following Jesus. It is true because we are not just trying to get our theology right, but working to become new people. We are trying to become the people who God designed us to be. We are moving from believing to being, which is a lifetime endeavor.

Finally, Jesus wants his followers to understand that following is critical. What I mean by critical is not criticism, but critical as in the most important thing. I would argue that this is the meaning behind the final four verses. *“Jesus said to another man, “Follow me.” But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”* In both conversations the people involved believed that there were other obligations that were more important than following Jesus. Burying one’s family was a mitzvah, or good deed that all Jews were expected to do. Saying goodbye to one’s family was a way of honoring one’s parents, or one’s spouse. Each was important. So, when Jesus says these things, he is not asking people not to bury their dead or say goodbye to family, he is instead reminding them of the critical nature of following: that it is only in following, in moving from believing to being, that one can truly emerge as a new human being. Putting anything else in the way of following restricts the transformation that God has planned for us.

Following Jesus is what Cindy Merten has been helping us do for the past 23 years. She has helped children and adults move from believing to being. She has helped people of all abilities move from believing to being. She has helped us understand that following is a lifelong pursuit and a critical part of our lives. She has been a gift to the process of embodiment for hundreds and hundreds of children and adults. I hope that you will stop and thank her this morning before you leave.

My challenge to all of us then is this, to ask ourselves how am I working at following Jesus that I might be the embodiment of the true humanity that Jesus is offering?