

MATTHEW 26 : 58***“ BUT PETER FOLLOWED HIM AT A DISTANCE ”***

Do you ever follow? Why? People follow because there is an advantage. If you are on the highway in bad winter weather, there is an advantage in following. You don't have to “find” the road or blaze the trail. If you're in the big city and unsure about where to go, it's helpful to have a friend in another car to lead the way. If you are trying to install a new piece of equipment in the house, it's good to have helpful instructions to follow. When you have a difficult decision to make, it's valuable to have good advice to follow.

This Ash Wednesday evening we consider Peter, and you, following Jesus. Regarding Simon Peter, do you remember the early “meetings” of Jesus and Peter? Peter's brother Andrew had heard John the Baptist say concerning Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God!”—that is, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Andrew spent time with Jesus that day. Then Andrew told his brother Simon (Peter), “We have found the Christ, the Messiah! Come and see!” Peter went. We don't know any more about that meeting. But we do know later Andrew and Peter, who were fishermen, were mending their nets at Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus told them to cast out the nets again. He granted them a great catch of fish!—in the deep water in the middle of the day! Peter was humbled and asked Jesus to depart. Jesus said, “Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men.” Peter and Andrew left their nets and followed Him. There was value in following Jesus. This was the promised One whom God said He would send to make all things right with the Father—that is, to pay the price for their sin. He was more than just a man. This was the long awaited Messiah and Christ, leader of God's people. Andrew and Peter y followed Jesus. He had much to offer them--God's mercy and pardon, and help against situations.

I assume that is also why you follow Jesus, why you are here this evening. Jesus has something valuable for you. In Him your sins are taken off your record, in Him you have someone blazing the trail for you to heaven, leading you on the way which you couldn't manage on your own. Jesus is the Shepherd for body and soul.

Peter with his strong and “rock-like” personality—“Peter” means “rock,” as in “petrified” wood—became the foremost of the twelve. When Jesus asked the Twelve, “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!* (Matthew 16:16). He, together with James and John, were taken by Jesus into the room where Jesus raised Jairus' daughter back to life, were taken to the mountain top where Jesus was transfigured in glory, were taken further into the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus for prayer.

Likewise, Jesus has given you many privileges and blessings too. How many miraculous solutions has He provided for you, or your family, or friends--miracles of healing or miracles of escape from peril and harm?

Yet Peter wasn't always so eager about following—not that he was looking to abandon Christ. But, instead of following, he wanted to do things his way. He wanted to lead for Jesus! When Jesus began to “spell out” to His disciples that He would suffer many things at the hands of the Jewish leaders, and at the hands of the Gentile/Roman leaders, that He would be crucified and killed, but rise again, Peter took Jesus aside and said, “May it never be!” “No way!” Jesus had to say to Peter, “Get behind Me Satan! You are a cause of stumbling to Me. You are not mindful of the things of God, but of the things of man” (Matthew 16:21-23). Peter was saying, “Jesus, You don't have to die.” Peter thought His way would be better for the Christ, that Jesus should follow him!

How many times in your life have you wanted to lead the way for Jesus? When affliction is “on your plate” or “on your back,” when hardship hovers over someone close to you, do you then contradict the Lord and find fault with Him--especially when He doesn't change it or fix it the way you think He should? In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter took it upon himself to draw his sword and begin to fight for Jesus, only to have Jesus tell him to put it away (John 18:10-11). Do you sometimes think you could get more people into church—members and non-member alike—with a big stick rather than with the Word of the Lord? Do you think your efforts are what have produced Christian faith in the hearts of your children? That by pushing them through the pipeline, you have secured faith for them? Certainly you have led them to the Word, but it is not you who brought them to faith. It is the Lord. The same for you. Do you sometimes think, “I have pulled out my tools and gotten myself to God!” ? Sorry, not so. It's Jesus, not you. Follow Him.

On the evening Jesus was arrested, He had already warned the disciples that they would all forsake Him that night. Jesus quoted Isaiah's prophecy, "I will smite the Shepherd and the sheep will be scattered" (Matthew 26:31). Peter begged to differ. Jesus specifically warned Peter that he would deny Him three times. Peter said, Never! When Jesus was taken under arrest, all the disciples including Peter fled. Peter, however, turned around. As our verse says, Peter followed at a distance. He should not have, but He did. He would have better "followed" the Lord by physically not following the Lord. Peter followed into the courtyard of the high priest and there denied in three instances that he knew the Lord.

Why did Peter follow? Was it his sense of physical loyalty to the Savior? Was it a flimsy backing-up of the big words of his mouth, "I will never leave You, though all else do"? Was it childish curiosity? What is a hope against hope that somehow Jesus would open up both barrels on His enemies and pull out the victory? None of those would have been reasons of faith, especially in view of Jesus words of warning. Such reasons all revolve around "self." Beware.

Do you ever specifically act contrary to Jesus? ? "I know this is not what you said, Lord, but I'm going to do it anyway." It might even seem good and even seem godly, but if it's not what God said, it's not good nor godly no matter how much you can excuse it with human logic or rationalize it away with human explanations. If it's wrong it's wrong. To follow Jesus is to follow Jesus. To follow Jesus is far better.

Note that that the text says, Peter followed "*at a distance.*" He didn't want to get too close, lest harm come his way. He stayed behind the arresting crowd, at the high priest's palace he stayed in the courtyard, when linked to Jesus he denied any association and went to the porch, when further suspicions about him arose, he cursed and he swore that he did not know Jesus. He followed at a distance all right. Not good.

Do you sometimes follow Jesus at a distance? Are there times when you don't want to make it obvious that you are a Christian, that Christ the crucified and risen Savior is your Savior and is important to you? When in a group, do you laugh along with the less than godly jokes? Do "God" and "Damn" and "Jesus" come out of your mouth so that you sound like "one of the boys" / "one of the girls"? Do you conceal the fact that the Bible is your Word of Truth and Life, that you attend church regularly, that you are attending tonight? Are you following Christ at a distance in order to "avoid" harm, yet all the while harming your relationship with the Lord?

It was for Peter's harm, wasn't it? He opened himself up to Satan's trap and denied the Savior three times. Jesus looked straight at him, and Peter went out and wept bitterly. Now Peter was following the Savior. "Lord, I have sinned grievously. Lord, please forgive Me—not on account of my credits, but because of Your mercy." In Jesus was forgiveness. This was following Jesus.

On one of the days after Jesus rose from the grave, He appeared to several of the disciples fishing again on the Sea of Galilee. He provided them another miraculous catch of large fish. Peter, in humble repentance, swam to the shore to meet Jesus. After their breakfast, Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love Me?"—a legitimate question after what Peter had done. Peter humbly laid his heart before the Lord, "Yes, Lord, You know that I love You." Jesus was his Savior, His only avenue for forgiveness. He needed Jesus. With love and forgiveness, Jesus gently reinstated Peter. He said to him, "Feed My sheep. Feed My lambs." Jesus then told Peter that Peter would die with his arms outstretched (crucifixion)! This time Peter did not counter, or come up with a better idea, or turn away from his relationship with Jesus. He received and heeded the Lord's direction. After Pentecost, with the Holy Spirit's help, Peter boldly follow and preached Christ. Peter did not follow himself, nor "Christ at-a-distance." He boldly preached Christ's death, resurrection, and the forgiveness in Jesus' name. Peter knew first-hand the suffering Savior's love and forgiveness. He treasured it dearly and proclaimed it boldly.

You also. Follow Jesus—not at a distance. Follow Jesus your Rescuer and Savior . Follow Him with your whole heart and life each day. Follow Him to the glorious realms of heaven!

So be it! Amen!

Pastor Kanzenbach--