

I Want to Follow Jesus, But I'm Scared

Mark 8: 31-38

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Are you good enough friends? Are you someone upon whom God can place trust?
Are you someone who, if this were some 2000 years ago, would you be someone who would follow Jesus?

Do you ever find yourself wondering that? Would I have said, "Yes, I will go."
"Yes, I have decided to follow Jesus."

Some days when I find myself wishing that I'd been alive then, so I could have seen Jesus, so I could have heard his words, witnessed his miracles, had my faith cemented into my soul, and hence forth be completely and utterly impermeable to the doubts of any day, on those days I believe, if I had lived then I would have followed Jesus. I would have said, "Yes." I would have been with him through it all, using all of my energy, passion and leadership skills. I think wow, I could have been one of the women funding Jesus' ministry, Luke's Gospel tells us about (8:3). Maybe I could have walked the countryside with Jesus, envisioning a whole new world, then maybe I might have had the guts to be present at the cross and even go to the tomb. Maybe, I think, I could have been one of his amazing followers.

Then I remember reality. I remember that I am pragmatic, tactical, moderate and someone who can be pretty risk averse. And then I'm glad that I was born almost 2000 years later because I'm pretty sure, I would have said "no" to Jesus. I cannot image, me with my five-year plans, long term goals and career aspirations, seeing someone walk by, hearing their call and then just dropping everything and following them. And even if I did follow and I did say "Yes." Would I have understood what he was saying? Would I have understood his call, his invitation to sacrifice, love and change? Would I have gotten it right? I don't know....I probably would have blown it.

But then I read more of scripture and I begin to think about the apostle Peter, that's when I turn to Peter the rock, and I think, well hey, maybe there is room for me, maybe friends there is room for all of us.

Peter says, "Yes" and follows Jesus, but it's not a linear ascent to sainthood.

Up until today's reading from Mark's Gospel we haven't really seen or heard much of Peter. In the early chapters of the book we know that Jesus healed his mother in law, when they stayed overnight at Peter's house but in this Gospel Peter hasn't really spoken.

Then in the halfway mark between call and crucifixion, Jesus gathers his apostles and asks them: “Who do people say that I am?” A number of them call out with different answers. “Some say you are John the Baptist, back from the dead.” Other’s think you are Elijah returned just before the fire of the Lord, and then some think you may be one of the prophets from old, Jeremiah, Ezekiel or Isaiah up from the grave.”

“But who, who do you say that I am?” He asks.

And then in the silent air, Peter says, “You are the Messiah, the Christ.”

Done. It’s now out there. You are the one for whom we have all been waiting. You are the one who will change everything for everyone. Peter says that. And in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus responds by calling Peter, the rock, the one upon whom which he will build his church.

Peter has done it he has named Jesus as the one. I imagine that the words just leap out of his mouth, directly from his gut. And when Jesus nods in agreement with Peter and then asks him not to say this to anyone, I can see the joy, the pride, the sheer delight envelope Peter. He’s got it right.

But, Peter’s glow only lasts so long. Because then Jesus begins to lay out, what it means for him to be the Holy One, the Messiah. Jesus will suffer, he will be tortured, he will be killed....and on the third day rise....but Peter stopped hearing after Jesus said he’d die.....

“No. No. Stop it now. That cannot be.” Peter grabs his shoulder turns Jesus, looks him in the eye. No, no, no, you’ve got this wrong.”

You know that feeling—when you’ve finally said—what you most fear—when you make yourself so very vulnerable and speak your truth—the courage it takes. That’s what Jesus has done. In this massively human moment he has told his closest friends, his fate, his fears and Peter who just moments ago, had completely understood, now cannot tolerate these words.

And Jesus pushes him aside, grabbing Peter and his words and tossing them as far away from his heart as possible. “Get behind me Satan.”

Connection, empathy, vulnerability, then dissonance, pain and anger. Jesus cannot tolerate Peter’s fears.

Peter has blown it. That connection he had with Jesus is gone. Jesus is furious that Peter, who had understood, has now completely misunderstood. So then Jesus goes on to explain in very clear terms how each of them, if they are to follow him, each of us, if we are to follow him, must turn and face Jerusalem, we must pick up our cross and understand all that we will lose if we choose to follow him. And ultimately all that we will gain if we dare to do so.

And if the story ended here, I would turn and walk away and say, I like Peter have no hope of doing this. I am too afraid, too risk averse, too strategic and myopic to understand. If the story ended here I would not be doing my best now to follow Jesus.

But the story continues on. Six days later Jesus specifically invites Peter, “Get behind me Satan,” Peter to go with him and James and John to the mountaintop where Jesus is transfigured. Peter sees it all. Does Peter understand it completely? No. But Jesus does not give up on Peter. Jesus never gives up on Peter.

Does Peter deny Jesus later, yes, Peter continues to be massively human, but in the end, it is Peter who goes to the far reaches of the earth telling the world of Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, died, and risen. Peter, who works miracles after Jesus ascends to Heaven, Peter who is eventually crucified for his belief in Jesus.

Jesus never gives up on Peter. And in the end Peter does not give up on Jesus.

Friends, truly following Jesus scares me. To be a follower of the Holy One, demands so much more than I think I can give, more than I think I can love, more than I think I can do and failing terrifies me. And yet, what I know is that God has called me, God is calling me. God has called you, and God is calling you, not to be perfect, not to be amazing, not to get it right every single time but to never ever give up.

Our world needs Jesus. Jesus needs us, just as we are, all that we are, from this day forth and forever more. Amen.