

Follow Me: Jesus' Call to Service in Postmodern Times

BY MARY NABER

After 20 years in the church, it's easy to believe that you know it all, you've heard it all, there's nothing new under the sun. But about 18 months ago, God pierced my heart with a newfound conviction. I read Matthew 25 again, but for the first time.

After the Son of Man comes in his glory, surrounded by angels, Jesus explains, he will look at the nations gathered before him and will separate them: sheep to the right, goats to the left.

To those on his left he will say, "Away from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the demon and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger, and you did not let me in. I needed clothes, and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me."

I read the verse again. And again. Then again. How, in all my years as a Christian, could I have read right past this verse? Suddenly Jesus' call—to communicate his special heart for the poor, oppressed, and outcast—broke through to me.

And I asked myself: Lord, when did I feed, clothe, offer shelter?

All that came to mind were the glazed doughnuts taken to church, the out-of-style clothes unloaded at the Salvation Army, the lumpy sofa offered to overnight guests.

"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?" (Matt. 5:46)

Surely Lord, I've done something beyond myself for you?!

And then I remembered the last time I had volunteered regularly: in high school, an effort which, quite frankly, was driven by pure selfish ambition. Pack the resume, go to college.

With few exceptions, I could not remember a time I had pursued sustained and systematic "service" motivated by my love for Jesus alone!

How could it be that in 20 years of church attendance, I had never once heard a complete sermon about actively caring for the poor or one with a challenge to "serve" outside the four walls of the church?

Curious (and furious!), I started digging into a bit of church history, which was probably a little late in coming as well. I learned that in this country and beyond, Christians have always been authors of service. Then, sometime in the early 20th century, the Christian church in America split along liberal/conservative lines regarding the interpretation of Scripture.

Yet when the fundamentalists rejected liberalism's "Jesus-not-really-God, Bible-not-really-inspired leanings," they rejected liberalism's embrace of social work as well. Of course many other factors contributed, but all we need to understand today is that our inheritance, at least in my evangelical community, is a faith largely devoid of service.

Why is this so critical today?

A rationalist, non-relational "knock-knock-here-are-the-four-spiritual-laws" apologetic served the Billy Graham and Bill Bright modernist era quite well. But with the advent of postmodernism, where truth is considered relative to subjective experience, most people don't care to debate, "Is it true?" but rather want to know, "Is it authentic? Does it make a difference?" And we, as Christians, must grapple for evidence!

"It is the intention of the gospel that things should be very different in the church of the resurrected Lord!...

*We are the only ones who
can convince others that
Christ has truly risen and that
he lives in his church.*

Apart from us, there is no proof."

ALLAN BOESAK

We have not demonstrated—at least to a convincing degree—that Christian faith feeds the hungry, gives drink to the thirsty, provides transformation to the lost, and offers restoration to the oppressed. What are we so busy doing instead?

I'm tired of sermons and seminars, talks and tapes, motivational mumbo jumbo and messages, preaching and panels. I'm tired of small groups and cell groups and Bible studies and guided studies. I'm tired of talk. Talk. Talk. Talk.

And I'm tired of constantly talking about my internal spiritual life and my personal piety and my individual relationship with Jesus. My. My. Me. Me. Me-o-my.

Because all the while I am decaying, I feel like a seed on the concrete—scorched in the sun, dry, cracked, drawing upon whatever remaining moisture lies within—when I know that God has called me to dig deep, to stretch, to venture into the mud and sometimes into smelly places. Prisons? Elderly homes? Soup kitchens?

Because every need I touch will replenish my spirit with Jesus' soul spring of life!

Jesus did not merely say, "Believe" (for even the demons do that.) He said, "Follow me." A few dozen times.

And still today Jesus says, "Follow me."

I will follow you, Lord. I will follow you to the crippled man at the pools of Bethesda, to the prostitute at the well. We will follow you to the blind, the lame, the lonely, the lost, the hungry 5,000. We will follow you to the cross.

*"Christ has no Body now but yours,
no hands, no feet on earth but yours.*

*Yours are the eyes through which
he looks with compassion on this world.*

*Yours are the feet with which
he walks to do good."*

ST. TERESA OF AVILA

I have one prayer for each of us. That we would each choose a segment of society identified as poor, outcast, oppressed. Consider this Old Testament list: the homeless, widows, orphans, prisoners.

These people exist; we simply need to find them. It's unlikely they are in our Bible studies. They might not even be in our churches. In fact, most of the people we're talking about can't even get to church.

Once we find them, let's devote ourselves to regular visits, once a week. Let's devote ourselves to a faith that is evidenced in action.

But what shall we say? What shall we do? Who cares? Simply go, as God's empty vessel (like Moses), and let God work miracles through you.

And the King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." ■

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