

What invitation does Jesus give his disciples in today's gospel reading? To follow him, right? What does it mean, to "follow" Jesus? Here's a simple, literal meaning: to follow someone is to do what they do, to watch them and mimic their words and actions. It's like the game, "Follow the Leader." When a leader speaks or acts, you do what they do; you watch them and mimic their words and actions. To follow Jesus, then, you do what Jesus does; you watch him and mimic his words and actions.

But following Jesus is not a game. It's definitely not like "Simon Says," when you follow the leader only when the leader's directions are prefaced with the words, "Simon says..." Following Jesus is not a game meant to trick you. It's not a game at all; instead, it's a matter of life and death. And, while following Jesus may be hard at times, it's not tricky; it's simply doing what Jesus does, watching him and mimicking his words and his actions.

Do you know anyone who does what Jesus does, someone who watches Jesus and mimics his words and his actions? Maybe you know a neighbor who follows Jesus—or a friend, a parent, a Facebook acquaintance, maybe someone who's sitting in the pew in front of you. Today I want to introduce you to some followers of Jesus whose lives took very different paths and who followed Jesus in very different ways.

My friend Bidy McGaha follows Jesus. Bidy was my neighbor in Toledo when I served as the pastor of Salem Lutheran Church. She had lived a block away from the church her whole life. As a child she had attended Sunday School and church; when I arrived, while she seldom came to worship, she attended a church ceramics class every Monday night. Whenever I drove by her house and saw her in the yard, I'd wave. When we were hiring a secretary, I heard from one of the other ceramics students that she was looking for a job and had secretarial experience, so when I pulled into the church parking lot one day and saw her, I stopped to talk.

At the time I had no idea that Bidy was thinking about applying for the job, and I sure didn't know that she was right in the middle of a conversation with Jesus. Seeing my van, she had said silently, "Lord, if Pastor Mary Lou just waves and drives by like she usually does, I won't apply for the job; if she stops to talk, then I will." Well, I did stop, and then Bidy had to apply. She had to listen to Jesus. She had to follow Jesus.

Bidy applied, and got the job, and after a few years I realized that we needed her more as the director of our after-school and summer programs than in the office, so I asked her to consider that. She said "No," and she said, "No," and she said, "No," again, until one day she said, "Yes." She came to a moment where, once again, she had to listen to Jesus. She followed Jesus out of the office and into the chaos of youth programming. It was a difficult transition, but she hung in there and really made a difference in our efforts to reach out into the neighborhood. A couple of years later when we were at a retreat together, we were reading the story of Jonah, and Bidy started laughing. "That's who I am," she said to me during a break. "I was running away from God. But God didn't give up and kept calling me, and I had to listen, and I had to follow." Bidy, AKA "Jonah," has retired from her job at Salem, but she continues following Jesus by organizing community gatherings for her "over 55" apartment complex.

Like Bidy, Corinne and Herb Chilstrom followed Jesus, even when it was hard. Both ELCA pastors, they sought God's guidance, together, for every one of their 65 years of marriage, in both joyful and sad times: during Herb's seminary years and in his first pastorate and a few years as a college professor, through a painful journey of infertility and then adoption of three children, during Herb's election as the bishop of the Minnesota Synod and then as the first presiding bishop of the ELCA from its inception in 1988 until 1995, and through Corinne's journey to ordained ministry 30 years after his. I came to know these followers of Jesus when Herb was called as the pastor of my family's congregation in Minnesota when I was twelve.

Herb and Corinne were faithful followers of Jesus. They began every day together, at the breakfast table, with family devotions; I know this because I had breakfast at their house more than once. They prayed together when they were rejoicing, and they prayed together when they were sorrowful; it's one of the ways they followed Jesus. On the worst day of their lives, they chose, again, to follow Jesus, after Herb discovered the body of their son, Andrew, who had killed himself in their basement on his first trip home from college. Corinne and Herb continued following Jesus that day; they made a choice to go public with their grief, a choice to tell the truth about what had happened to their family, a choice to testify to the love of God in the midst of their unspeakable loss. They spoke candidly about their journey of grief and God's presence with them, and each wrote a book about their journey. Corinne's book, published in 1993, is *Andrew, You Died Too Soon*, and Herb's, published in 2017, is *When a Father Loses a Son*. In their private and public lives, Herb and Corinne followed Jesus, even when it was hard.

Like Bidy, like Corinne and Herb, Gerhard Ebeling followed Jesus. Born in 1912 into a churchgoing family in Germany, he studied theology in Germany and in Switzerland. As the Second World War loomed, he studied with Dietrich Bonhoeffer at an underground seminary in Germany and then began pastoring a church in Berlin, where he had to make a choice between serving Hitler in the nationalized church and serving Jesus in the Confessing Church. He chose Jesus. He followed Jesus. Unlike Bonhoeffer, he survived the war, and he continued following Jesus, teaching theology at universities in Germany and Switzerland.

Ebeling wrote a book, *The Nature of Faith*, about discipleship, asking questions about how we follow Jesus. He writes:

The authority of Jesus reached its climax in the call to discipleship. [What Jesus invited his followers to was neither a life of study as pupils nor a life of action as revolutionaries, but, rather, a journey as disciples, in which they would share Jesus' way. Jesus desired that his followers] let their way be determined, without anxiety, by the rule of the God who is near. The call to discipleship is simply the call to faith. For [we cannot express] faith more concretely... than by saying, "Be not anxious, for the heavenly Father knows what we need."

Ebeling continues:

[This is the] message of Jesus—the nearness of the rule of God, the clarity of God's will, and the simplicity of discipleship. [This message brings] joy, freedom, and lack of anxiety. When we live in faith, we are living with Jesus; we are living in the context of his remarkable authority. If discipleship means sharing in the way of Jesus, then understanding his preaching of the will of

God means sharing in his freedom, and understanding his message of the rule of God means sharing in his joy, his obedience, and his courage in face of the nearness of God.

Thus far Ebeling. In other words, being a disciple of Jesus means that you follow Jesus. You watch Jesus and say what he says and do what he does. You walk with Jesus, or walk behind Jesus, or walk next to Jesus, which puts you—where? Right in Jesus' presence. Following Jesus puts you where he is. And because he is with you whenever you are following him, even imperfectly, you may live without anxiety. Because God is near you, even when you stumble, you can live freely and joyfully. Because God is with you, even when you fail, you can live faithfully, even in the midst of disappointment or betrayal or abandonment or grief or fear. You can follow Jesus anytime, anywhere, because he is always near you, right here, ready to lead you. AMEN