

## Following Jesus in a Post-Christian World

Mark 1: 14b-20

Question: Jack, what have been the pivotal moments of your life? How has your pilgrimage influenced who you are today?

The time was right! John was dead and, with Jesus' wilderness experience behind him, he was ready. So Jesus returned to his home territory of Galilee and began to call followers. The account of Jesus calling his first disciples is really an amazing story depicted in the gospels. Jesus walked past them while they were working on their family fishing boats and said, "follow me." They dropped everything and followed.

We don't know, and can't know, the facts of what happened. That's not what the Bible is about. It tells us about Jesus' ministry, life, and teaching and their impact and meaning for us. It tells us how Jesus called his followers. It reminds us how followers are called today. God's call is not necessarily a particular experience tied to place and time. This is an understanding of "call not as event, but as the dynamic of a growing and powerful claim." (Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text*).

My journey of following Jesus began in a pre-cognitive stage and seemed as natural as breathing. Following Jesus was what my family did. From them I learned to love the Bible. Cherished memories included a daily Bible story reading after supper. There was no anxiety attached to those readings – no concern with "did it really happen?" As a young child, I never questioned the history. As I grew older, that aspect seemed less and less important.

I've thought about my faith journey a lot since I've grown older. Over many years, there have been many experiences, crises, and pivotal events. I have found new perspectives and opportunities for commitments and re-evaluations.

Each of us begins the journey of following Jesus differently. That journey also continues in ways that are individual for each of us. My sense of call at this time is to walk with this congregation as it seeks to translate a deeply rooted biblical faith into the language of a post-Einstein, quantum physics, post-Enlightenment, fundamentalist-filled 21<sup>st</sup> century universe.

I see Crossroads as having an opportunity to help the Christian Church make the shift into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and also to bring the 21<sup>st</sup> century Church back to its roots of following Jesus. The Christian journey is all about change, about transformation into the image of God seen in Jesus, and about a change in attitude from scarcity and fear to abundance and hope. Our mission is nothing less than being partners with the Spirit to change the world.

How will we accomplish this mission? First, we must decide that we will be full partners with the Spirit, doing our best and giving our utmost while trusting that God is always seeking peace and justice in partnership with us. Then, we must decide how we will be church – how we will minister and reach out in love.

Let me say a word about the title of this teaching -- *Following Jesus in a Post-Christian World*. That happens to be the working title of a book I'm writing and it's actually not as subversive as it might appear. First of all, the disciples followed Jesus in a pre-Christian world, a Jewish world. The New Testament is a product of the transition from a Jewish to a Christian context. The institutional Church did not exist *per se* until the fourth century. It is important that we understand the Jewish and Roman world of the first century if we are to understand the New Testament. The term *post-Christian* is used widely today as a way of recognizing that the values and assumptions of the Christian Church are no longer the common values and assumptions of

the world, or even American society. We live in a *post-Christian world*, one in which the Spirit calls us to be the presence of the risen Christ.

The *Ask Jack* question today is very personal for me: asking about the pivotal moments in my life and how my pilgrimage has influenced who I am. I shared some of my personal history last year in two teachings. One concerns how growing up in a military environment affected me. The other describes how my understanding of God has changed and grown through the experiences of my life.

My dad was a military chaplain, so we moved a lot. I went to a lot of different schools. There was a lot of entering new situations and I tended to locate myself on the outer fringes of the inner circle -- still connected, but never really part of the *in group*.

A chaplain's home reflects the tension of living in a military world that is all about the effective use of deadly force, and the Christian world of non-violence. That experience has given me a penchant for seeing the importance of living in the tensions of life -- a gift my family gave me.

I confess that I'm pretty gullible. I mean that I have a tendency to ask questions of myself and my faith and really believe in the answers that emerge. I tend to be naïve in trusting the intentions of others and too honest in sharing my thoughts, my questions, and my uncertainties. Not everyone in church life likes that. By and large at Crossroads, you're pretty comfortable with it -- so we're a good match.

I appreciate this opportunity to talk about myself and I'm grateful for your curiosity as to how I got to be the way I am. This is a good thing and it also may well be a tactic to get me to tell more stories rather than discuss theological concepts *ad nauseum* as I am prone to do!

What have been the pivotal moments of my life? Many of them have been experiences of grief and loss. That's not a coincidence because grief, when it is embraced and given voice, can bring new life into being.

There was grief when I realized I would never become a major league baseball player. I had an opportunity, but inside I knew I wasn't really good enough. More important, I knew that it was no longer my dream.

The new life that emerged through that grief involved music. I majored in music in college and then earned a Master degree in music. That pathway led me to Kathy and we've will have been married 29 years next month. With all the moving and changing, it's amazing we ever met. It's pretty miraculous! Together, we have encountered, survived, and thrived traumas, significant losses, grief, and much joy.

Our two children are a source of great joy. When we were first married, we had dreams of a large family with lots of children. But we seemed unable have children. It was miraculous that we had our one biological child Jonathan.

The grief of not being able to have more children led us to pursue adoption which opened the door to the great joy and blessing of our daughter Lisa. The fact that Lisa is from Colombia made our family international and has tied us to the nation of Colombia.

Kathy's grief became mine. She lost her father when she was four years old. Later, her mother died from Alzheimer's disease. There are very few of her family left living.

She has shared my grief, the loss of my mother in an automobile accident many years ago and the recent death of my father also from Alzheimer's disease. Our shared grief has also included Kathy's having cancer twice, the second time just as we moved to Kansas City. The resultant challenges included lost career opportunities and the fear of early death.

After 19 years as an Associate Pastor in my home church in Vienna, VA, a pivotal moment came when I left that church. They would have been happy for me to stay as an Associate, but not to become their senior pastor. It was the loss of a dream for me. I felt confused and frustrated when no other churches in that area chose me to be their senior pastor. Maybe I was the victim of the success I had experienced through our music and theater ministry at Vienna. Maybe I just didn't look or sound like their idea of a senior pastor.

The lost dream of being a baseball player provided an opportunity for me to do something else at which I could excel: being a church musician and associate pastor. The realization, after many years, that continuing as an associate pastor would no longer challenge or feed me led to my decision to become a senior pastor. In this role, I stand up in front of a congregation every week, interpret the Bible, and share my understanding of faith. In partnership with the members, I take responsibility for the growth, health, and direction of the congregation. In coming to Kansas City, as pastor of Crossroads Church, I'm realizing the truth of Walter Brueggemann's definition of call: the "sense that my life "has a theonomous cast," that *God breathes* in me and reveals the reality of "call not as event, but as the dynamic of a growing and powerful claim." (Brueggemann) God claims more and more of me to the extent I am willing to offer God more.

So, what is driving my life now? Some of you are familiar with the Enneagram and find it a helpful way to understand yourself and others. I'm an Enneagram "9" which means that I have a strong desire to take my cues from others, to value peace and tranquility at all costs. Knowing what I want is often difficult, but it's up to me to decide what I want and up to me to pursue it. The same is true for us as a congregation. I will listen to you and learn from you as I have for the past five and a half years. I will also continue to share with you, as clearly as I can, the vision I see for this congregation.

What person have I become on my faith journey? What are the core values of my life? I had a vision once – or maybe it was a daydream? It was really quick, happening in a heartbeat, yet it was clear. As a result, I felt a certain that all of life is one. That is still a core value for me today: all people and all creation are one. We are sisters and brothers. The task of love is to relate to each other in the fullness of our humanity and seek to know each other intimately and compassionately. I value what I learn about love from my family every day. They reveal God to me

My second core value is to be open to honest and probing questions, and to the truth they reveal about my self, the world, and my faith. I will never stop asking these questions of myself and of our faith. I will never stop letting my answers change me and help me grow. That's what I seek to do every Sunday as I talk to you. I will continue to do that the rest of my life.

Who am I today? I'm still the teacher, listener, leader, and professional friend I've been. Today, I am more Jack than I've been before. I'm more willing to decide how I want to invest my life. I find myself more likely to be practicing what I've always taught – the danger of not standing up on my own two feet. It is more dangerous to run away from life.

What's future in following Jesus in a post-Christian world? Jesus' disciples follow him in a pre-Christian world and it changed their lives forever. They found something worth giving their lives. Eventually they died for something worth giving their lives for. I expect the same today. Following Jesus in a post-Christian world will give us something worthy of our life's investment. When we die, we will have something worthy of having given ourselves to completely. Thanks for listening to my story. I am blessed to share our story together, blessed to share the journey with you.