

Follow, follow, follow

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 John 14:1-6a

A sermon preached by the Reverend Neil Weatherhogg on April 8, 2018
at the First Presbyterian Church, Topeka, Kansas.

The song, “Try to Remember” from the musical, “The Fantasticks,” sometimes plays on a loop in my mind. Haunts me for reasons I don’t quite understand. Before the mud of Woodstock, before Neil Armstrong walked on the Moon, before this Neil graduated from college, before Elizabeth Taylor received an Academy Award for “Butterfield 8,” and before Wilt Chamberlain scored 52 points in his first varsity game for Kansas University, “Try to Remember” had become part of our national musical culture.

The show’s original off-Broadway production ran a total of 42 years and 17,162 performances before the Sullivan Street Playhouse closed for the last time on January 13, 2002. Janet and I first saw the production a number of years ago in Texas, and then again two years ago this month at the Spencer Theatre at the University of Missouri in Kansas City.

The play opens with the mystical and romantic song, “Try to Remember the kind of September when life was slow and oh, so mellow.” The young lovers, Matt and Luisa, live next door to each other and fall in love. The first stanza of the song ends with, “Try to remember and if you remember then follow,” with the word “follow” sung nine times like an echo – *follow, follow, follow....*

Follow what? One’s dreams? One’s first love? One’s hopes for the future? It’s never been clear to me. Nevertheless, the song did come to mind when I began to reflect on our New Testament reading and particularly verse 6, where Jesus answers Thomas’ question about where Jesus is going, “I am the way,” Jesus responds, “and the truth, and the life.”¹

I find it interesting that in the preceding chapter in John’s Gospel, the Apostle Peter asks the same question, “Lord, where are you going?”² Jesus doesn’t answer either question directly. To Peter,

¹ John 14:6a

² John 13:36a

he replies, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward.” And, as I mentioned, to Thomas he simply affirms, “I am the way,....” So follow, follow, follow, follow....

I have read these lines from John 14 many times through the years, most often at funeral services. They remind us that Jesus has gone and prepared a special place in heaven for us with many “rooms,” as the older translations put it. We have our own personal space in heaven, a rather idealized notion of what the next life will look like. Indeed, it bears some resemblance to how we felt when we first fell in love. Everything was wonderful; we LIVED in a dream world; we left behind the present with its troubles. Who needs reality when one’s in love? Sound familiar?

Matt and Luisa naively lived in their own dream world unable to see beyond the wall that separates them and their homes. Then Luisa is kidnapped and their dream world falls apart, even as Matt also gets exposed to the “real world” with its pain and unpredictability. When they finally get together after a series of adventures, they realize they can only understand true love after they encounter hurt and pain.

Where is Jesus going, both Peter and Thomas want to know? When Jesus proclaims “I am the way,” he speaks not of some far-away fantasy world where everyone gets tucked into their own bed in their own room. As our opening hymn³ reminded us, he’s going first to the cross and a brutal death before his resurrection, which we celebrated last week on Easter Sunday. The cross and resurrection – two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other.

Indeed, just seven days removed from the Hallelujah’s of Easter, this morning we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper that reminds us of Jesus’ body broken and his blood shed on the cross. This is what we remember when we come to the table – a crucified and risen Savior who bids us to follow through all of the pain and pleasure, the failures and triumphs, the dreams and reality, love gained and love lost, traveling the ruts, the detours and the expressways of life. Follow, follow, follow this One who claims that he and God are one and the same, who declares, “If you know me, you will know my Father also.”⁴

³ *Lift High the Cross*

⁴ John 14:7a

Almost four years ago, Janet and I visited Ground Zero in New York City - the Memorial to the more than 2,600 lives lost at the World Trade Center in Manhattan during the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. I didn't realize it at the time, but the actor and singer, Jerry Orbach, . . . perhaps best known for his portrayal of Detective Lennie Briscoe on the NBC crime drama *Law and Order*, .sang the hit song from "The Fantasticks" at Ground Zero, one year after the attack: "Deep in December it's nice to remember without a hurt the heart is hollow...." There was a lot of hurt that day. Many who were present cried as they remembered the tragedy of the year before.

Amy Gamerman, a critic for the Wall Street Journal, who showed up at a performance of "The Fantasticks" on September 14, three days after the attack, was the first to make a connection between the song and September 11. Only about two dozen people were in the audience in the theatre just a few blocks from Ground Zero. Referring to "Try to Remember," Gamerman wrote, "A familiar old ballad was suddenly transformed into a (plaintive) elegy for the innocence we had all lost.... By the end of the song, I was in tears. So was one of the actors."

First we remember when our hearts were broken, then we remember when our hearts were healed. First we remember Good Friday, then we remember Easter. First we remember the cross, then we remember the empty tomb. First we shed tears of sorrow over the death of the Son of God, then we shed tears of joy over the resurrection of the Son of God. Then we follow, follow, follow the risen Christ on the way.

Did you know that "the Way" was one of the earliest names for the followers of Christ, even before they were called Christians? Check out Acts 9:2. Today, we are still followers of the Way that leads to the "Truth" that results in "Life" – abundant life now; eternal life later. Henceforth, writes scholar Gerard Sloyan, "Jesus is known by the *way* of the cross and the resurrection."⁵

Thomas Currie, Presbyterian minister colleague, pastored the First Presbyterian Church in Kerrville, Texas, a few years after I left that congregation for one in Kentucky. He also is retired, as am I, and raises the pointed question for us living in a world with multiple threats and challenges. He writes:

⁵ "John," *Interpretation*, a Bible Commentary, John Knox Press, 1988

*How do we proclaim the gospel in a culture bent on its own lethal self-justifications, its worship of wealth, its comfortable ability to ignore or dismiss the cries of others, its easy acceptance of the brutality of its own politics, the ruthlessness of its own getting and spending, the self-absorption of its own idolatries, and perhaps worst of all, its own quiet hopelessness?*⁶

His last example particularly resonates with me – how do we proclaim the gospel in a culture of “quiet hopelessness?” Many things contribute to my sense of quiet hopelessness, not the least of which is the spate of school shootings we’ve seen over the past several years. Beginning with Columbine in 1999, more than 187,000 students attending at least 193 primary or secondary schools have experienced a shooting on campus during school hours – an average of 10 school shootings per year since Columbine.⁷

I went to high school in the 1950s when the outside doors on schools were not locked, and classroom doors had no locks, when no security guards were posted, and when the most violent action was being sent to the assistant coach’s office for discipline. M. C. Jones was about six feet four inches tall and weighed close to 240 pounds. I can personally testify that he wielded a paddle this long with great force.

So how do we proclaim the gospel in an era of violence inflicted on our children and youth, in a culture of quiet hopeless? No doubt we will continue to debate without a resolution how to increase and improve access to mental health resources, make gun possession more difficult to obtain, hire more security guards, or arm the teachers (dear God, I hope not!)

I don’t pretend to have all the answers. What I propose, therefore, comprises not a solution but a way back to sanity, a way to achieve respect for human life, a way to love one another more completely, and a way for faith in divine guidance, without which hope for a better future becomes futile.

If the world is such a mess, perhaps you’re wondering, What can I possibly do to make it better? God doesn’t call us to solve the world’s problems. God calls each of us the same way Jesus

⁶ “Not without Tears,” *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XLI, Number 1, Lent, 2018.

⁷ *The Week*, April 6, 2018, quoting a yearlong *Washington Post* analysis.

called his disciples, with just two words: “Follow me.”⁸ Brief but profound. Simple but complex. Easy but very difficult.

He gave us the road map. You know it as well as I do: love God with our whole being; . . . show charity and treat others in need as we would want to be treated in the same or similar circumstances. Brief but profound. Simple but complex. Easy but very difficult.

Follow, follow, follow Jesus. Reject the violent ways of the world. Instead, follow the Son of God, who is the **WAY** and the **TRUTH** and the **LIFE**. He will lead us directly to God, and there's no place I'd rather be. How about you?

⁸ Matthew 9:9