

**SLD07.04.10 14<sup>th</sup> Ordinary**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**2 Kings 5:1-14**  
**Luke 9:57-10:2**  
**Introduction to the Summer Saints Series**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Would-Be Followers of Jesus”**

I imagine Jesus as a charismatic leader, one to whom people are naturally drawn, or repelled, depending on how he strikes a body. But clearly some around him are magnetized by his presence, intrigued by his teachings, inspired by his single-minded focus. Luke’s passage this morning describes some folks who want more of Jesus, who have felt drawn to him, who know he’s something special. They want to follow him, some say even wherever he goes.

Only one gets the feeling from this passage that Jesus’ directive to follow him is perhaps less simple than these early disciples have yet to imagine. They’re enthusiastic, all right, the way we can all get from time to time in the presence of a charismatic teacher; they *want* to follow him...but...Jesus suggests... maybe the Way is too tough. (There’ll be no place to lay your head.) Or, maybe they’ve got more pressing responsibilities. (Let me go bury my father.) Or maybe they just have other stuff they need to do first. (Lemme just say goodbye to my folks.)

On the face of it, Jesus’ invitation to follow him seems pretty straightforward. “Follow me,” he says. And according to scripture, some people sure enough drop whatever they’re doing and follow Jesus. But others...well, they’ll follow Jesus as soon as they can get around to it. Soon as they can fit it on their list. Soon as they take care of more pressing matters. And only then, if it’s not too uncomfortable. Not too disruptive. Not too radical, or awkward, or just plain inconvenient.

Sound familiar? Sure does to me.

“Follow me.” On the face of it, simple enough instructions. But apparently he means “now.” And “from now on.” And “before all else.” For “no one,” he says, “who puts a hand to the plow (which is facing forward) and looks back” (that is, where the plow’s already been) is fit for his kingdom.

Interestingly, our story this morning from the Hebrew Scriptures likewise refers to the difficulties associated with following another deceptively simple set of instructions – “wash and be clean.”

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, has leprosy. An Israeli servant girl suggests that he go the King of Israel for healing. Naaman goes to Jehoram, King of Israel at the time, with his request, and Jehoram clutches. “What, am I God that I can do this?” and thinks Naaman’s just trying to pick a fight with him.

The prophet Elisha steps up and says, “Let me handle this,” and tells Naaman to dip himself in the Jordan seven times. Now Naaman gets mad, thinking Elisha is making a fool of him.

Again his servants, who seem to be the only ones in the story who know what’s going on: “If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean?’”

So Naaman, who has the good sense to listen to them, says, “okay...,” follows Elisha’s simple instructions, and sure enough, they do the trick.

Only they do more than one trick, those instructions. Turns out (what a surprise) they’re not really so simple are at first they seem. Because once Naaman “washes and is made clean,” not only is he healed of his leprosy, but he’s wowed, convinced,

convicted to the core that “there is no God in all the earth except for Israel’s.” What’s more, he commits forever to worshipping this God. Once Naaman takes the plunge to follow Elisha’s “simple” instructions, Once he puts his hand to that plow and looks forward, why, his whole life is changed.

Let this be a warning. “Follow me.” “Wash and be clean.” Any of us who have been on the path of discipleship very long knows those are not simple instructions at all. Even at their best, they can be disorienting, disruptive, undesirable; at worst they can feel shattering, dangerous, even impossible, the uncompromising challenge accompanying these “simple” directives too often categorically at odds with who we are and how we prefer to live.

I’d venture that this has always been true for followers of Jesus. At least for most of us. Christians have always had reason, often good ones, for straying from the difficult path of discipleship, or leaving it altogether, or maybe even not getting started on it in the first place. But once in a while somebody seems able to put their hands to Jesus’ plow and living forward on his path in a consistent, or focused, or fascinating manner. We call them “saints.” Some Christians even canonize them, set them apart as holier than others. We reformed Protestants, refusing as we do to believe than any would-be follower of Jesus is holier than any another, don’t go there. We’re not fans of setting people apart as more special to God or to the church or to each other based on their relationship with the Sacred. Certainly we stop short of praying to or through anyone but Jesus. “Saints” for us are not folks who are “perfect,” whatever that means, just people who somebody, whether the Pope, the press, or just you and I, regard as

doing a more consistent, or focused, or sacrificial, or fascinating job of putting their hands to the plow of discipleship and living forward on the path Jesus calls us to tread. Indeed, we recognized some time ago here at Emory Church that if we fail to learn from other examples of discipleship, other (Christian) ways of understanding and experiencing and worshipping God, we're setting aside some important teachers, missing out on some important learning opportunities as we seek how to "live the gospel" ourselves. For the focus, you see, of this looong stretch of ordinary time between Pentecost in June and Christ the King Sunday in November is meant to be less on the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ than on how we "would-be followers" of Jesus go about living the gospel in our own lives, the choices we make, the chances we take. We in the Reformed tradition are forever scanning for ways and means of faithfully, creatively, authentically, following Jesus ourselves.

So each summer we trot out a variety of examples of people who, over the ages, have lived the gospel in vibrant, meaningful, imaginative ways. Usually I, operating as ad hoc Popette for the series, get to choose who goes on the vernal liturgical list. Having done this for a number of years now, this year we decided instead to focus on *your* favorites – to reprise your "Top Ten" of the "saints" from whom we've already heard.

This may seem a little silly, in a way, there being an almost infinite number of extraordinary disciples over the ages from whom to learn. But among the advantages of this reprisal, besides lightening the load of our weekly invention and execution of worship themes, is to see if you've been listening, to seem with whom you connected, to hear which of the "holy ones" we've visited over the last years have made an impression

on you, have touched your heart, have inspired your imagination, have impacted your own discipleship. Again, the point of our Summer Saints Series is not just to hear more stories or acquire more historical or even spiritual information, it's to open ourselves to personal spiritual growth and formation in ways that might not have yet occurred to us.

So today we launch a new sermon series about the “saints” you voted for, notable would-be followers of Jesus Christ who, in the last half decade, have touched you, taught you, perhaps helped tether your own hand to the plow of discipleship. Because we all know, do we not, at least the days on which we're awake and honest, that responding to Jesus' command to “follow me,” or even to Elisha's or John the Baptist's ‘wash and be clean,’ is a whole lot easier said than done. Plus, God makes each of us so different, in personality, in understanding, in skills and talents, in personal preferences and inclinations, that lots of options for discipleship can be helpful!

And don't imagine, incidentally, that we in the church are the only ones looking for different options for responding to the Sacred.

American medical intuitive, mystic. and author, Caroline Myss notes in her preface to a recent Christian Spiritual Teacher study series<sup>1</sup> that “a mystical renaissance is at work in our world” today.

Whereas six or seven years ago when I first started preaching a summer series on “saints,” I nervously awaited being busted by the Reformed Liturgical Police, now, according to Myss, “our world is surrounded by a subtle field of grace in which individuals everywhere are exploring” what she calls “the seductive invitation to develop a joyful and intimate relationship with God.”

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<sup>1</sup>30 Days with a Great Spiritual Teacher Series, compiled by Richard Chilson, Ave Maria Press, 2008, Notre Dame, Indiana, pp.vii-xi.

And she's right about that, don't you think? About an increasing spiritual hunger all around us? A hunger no longer adequately fed, or often, even addressed, we have to confess, by many traditional church practices? Yet a hunger that pulses through, not just the church, but modern culture, demanding attention and authentic, creative, often-new-to-us spiritual practices, some as old as Christendom, others exemplified by the great mystics of the medieval and Renaissance eras.

Says Myss, "...we have built a culture on the intellectualizing of God, and people are recognizing and discovering the need to develop a more refined spiritual path based, not just on intellectual discourse, but on direct experience." Echoes author-priest Richard Rohr in a review of the series, "Mere repetition of formulas is no longer enough to feed our hungry souls. Here (among the medieval and renaissance mystics) is solid, traditional, and yet revolutionary spiritual teaching from the ages!"

Of course, here at Emory Church, just as we do not limit ourselves to officially canonized ones, nor do we confine our holy exemplars to mystics, or indeed, even always to Christians! (most notably this year - Mahatma Gandhi.) Among the Top Ten (okay,eleven) you chose this year are many mystics – Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen, Terese of Lisieux – but also such activists as Sojourner Truth, Bill W. and Mother Teresa, such plain wonderful oddballs as St. Francis and Caryll Houselander, and, in Augustine of Hippo, a formative theologian. All from different ages, genders, perspectives, all with something to teach us.

If there is any generalization that can be made about these diverse "holy ones," perhaps it is that, despite all the reasons that it's tough to follow Jesus, nevertheless

each of these put their hand to the plow and looked and lived forward into whatever challenges God had in store for them, that so, by the grace of God, might we.

May God speak to each us through the lives we witness this summer that we, too, might put our hands to the plow and look, and live, forward, with a whole new set of eyes.

To the glory of God. Amen.