

Will You Come and Follow Me

John Wilkinson

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I Corinthians 1:1-9 and John 1:29-42

Perhaps your late 2016 experience was akin to mine – even though I know it's not statistically verifiable, it seemed as if famous people were dying at an accelerated pace, a discouraging pace. Perhaps it's the nature of celebrity and media these days, that it will continue to seem like a great volume simply because more people are famous and we know about them in a different way. Still, how many – for this reason and others – did you hear say couldn't wait for 2016 to be over, because of who we lost?

A partial, a very partial, list...

- Entertainment icons: David Bowie , Leonard Cohen, Merle Haggard, Gene Wilder, Debbie Reynolds, Gwen Ifill, in her own dignified way
- Literary icons: Umberto Eco, Harper Lee
- Sports icons: Muhammad Ali, who became more than a famous athlete, Pat Summitt (the same), Arnold Palmer, Gordie Howe
- Political icons: Janet Reno, Fidel Castro, Antonin Scalia
- Transcendent icons: Elie Wiesel

My personal/generational icons: Carrie Fisher (I am a product of the Star Wars era, and losing Princess Leia, who was so much more than Princess Leia, struck a personal cord), Prince (the same), John Glenn, astronaut and senator (how cool is that?!), from New Concord, Ohio, and best of all... a Presbyterian elder.

What I have been thinking about as I ponder that list is the unlikely nature of renown. Or the difficult paths taken to get there. Gwen Ifill, fighting against both racism and sexism to claim a respected role in the journalistic universe.

Muhammad Ali, a terribly gifted boxer who – whether you agreed with him or not – became an articulate opponent of racism *and* the Vietnam War, an articulate proponent of religious diversity and a touching champion of Parkinson's disease.

Elie Wiesel, who almost single-handedly through his writing and his very person, kept the horrors of the Holocaust in front of generation after generation. In secular terms, they made the most of what they had been given.

They swam upstream, defied the odds. For some, their contributions to peace and justice and reconciliation will far outlive them. I am grateful for their lives. But I am also intrigued by how they made it, from a secular standpoint, how they followed their call, from a faith standpoint.

I am not a tattoo person, not a Pinterest person. If I were, here are two iconic signposts for me.

Theologian and writer Frederick Buechner once wrote that “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

And poet Mary Oliver concludes her wondrous poem “A Summer Day” with the question “Tell me, what is it you plan to do/with your one wild and precious life?”

It is easy, when looking at an “in memoriam” list of famous people, or talented people, or accomplished people, to deflect Buechner’s observation and Oliver’s question on to them, to say quickly, I could never write like Harper Lee or adjudicate like Janet Reno or be like John Glenn.

The more interesting question, and I think the more faithful one, is quickly to dismiss “how can I be like them?” and, rather, answer that question for yourself, or myself. How do I connect MY deep gladness with the world’s deep hunger? What will I do with MY one wild and precious life, and not someone else’s? How can I – a unique and beloved child of God blessed with unique gifts by that same God – respond? And when things don’t go smoothly, when doors seem to close and no windows open, when clarity about gladness and hunger is elusive, what do I do? How do I continue to follow?

For people of faith, and more specifically for those who follow Jesus, it begins with baptism. Last week Lynette reminded us of Jesus’ baptism. There are many takeaways. We treat baptism as the thing that saves us, that punches our heavenly ticket...it is not. It is a seal that confirms what already is and a sign that

points us in a direction. And because Jesus was baptized, it confirms our solidarity with him.

Every sermon in some ways could be a baptism sermon, but the real question is what do we do with our baptisms. How can we leverage the promise of our baptism to pursue our calling? How can we rely on our baptism when the pathway is unclear? How can we lean into our baptism in those moments where we are anything BUT glad, when we feel like we don't know what to do with our life, and feel that it's anything but wild or precious?

We remember our baptism. It is the only credential we need. It is our invitation, our mandate, our gateway. We remember our baptism, and then we follow.

But how? Many are asking that question, and asking it again in very real ways. How do I follow? What do I do?

The early disciples' narrative sets a rhythm for us. Our gospel lesson is in two movements this morning. Pay attention to the first – John the Baptist reflecting on who Jesus is. Testifying that Jesus is the Son of God. John sees him again, the next day – there's the Lamb of God, he shouts out. A group of John's disciples are curious. Curious, a curiosity ignited by John's identification.

And they follow Jesus. Simple as that. No long internal debate on their part, no weighing the pros and cons. They follow Jesus. A tremendous interaction follows. Jesus: "What are you looking for?" They asked him where he was staying. "Come and see," he said. Notice that Jesus rarely answers questions, and often re-directs them. It can be so annoying! Come and see, he says. And they did. They followed Jesus to come and see and were never the same again.

Come and see. And we do; we follow. Note there is no interview, no references. No credit report, no audition, not even an election to be a disciple. Come and see.

We want to know so much more about those who seemed to drop everything and follow. What we do know is that they were everyday people, uncredentialed in every way except the most important credential, the one

we share with them. An invitation to come and see and a promise, a baptismal promise, that you will have everything you need to do what I call you to do. And I will be with you.

Gail O'Day writes that here the verb "to follow" operates on two levels. "It has a literal meaning in the story line, but it also serves as a metaphor for discipleship." (*New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX, page 530*) The double meaning makes Jesus' question more than just one of asking directions – "What do people seek when they follow Jesus?" (Page 531)

What were these disciples looking for in their lives? What did their moment need that following Jesus could offer? What are *you* looking for, when you follow Jesus? What am *I* looking for? You will provide your answer. I will provide mine. It may be in part because of your background, your established, inherited family pattern. Yet even now you are here. Why?

Your answer will be yours, and mine will be mine, but perhaps it goes something like you have heard about, or read about, this Jesus, and you are searching. You are looking, for meaning in your life, for a way to connect with your deep question, your deep journey. Something about his question – "what are you looking for? – and invitation – come and see – has made you a follower.

That doesn't mean you have it all figured out, theologically or autobiographically. Hardly. It means you are compelled, intrigued, drawn in some way, in your mind or your heart or your soul. It means something has connected with hunger and bliss, something has been catalyzed in your quest to live your life.

In this week when we remember Martin Luther King, Jr. in a particular way, we remember his words about following his call: "you don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."

I am compelled by that. I am compelled by the chemistry of risk and uncertainty and hope that goes with any of us when we seek to follow Jesus, especially when it leads us to something new. How on earth could any of the disciples have known what they were getting into? How, therefore, on earth can we?

What we must do, however, is trust. Trust the God who calls us. Trust Jesus who invites us. Trust the Holy Spirit who gives us the gifts we need. And when things don't work out, we double down on trusting God, not in a wishful thinking, cross your fingers way – but in a roll up your sleeves way, to get back at it, the hard work of discernment, the rarely linear work of figuring out what I will do when I grow up, the breath-taking work of seeking hunger and bliss' intersection, of getting a glimpse of what it looks like, and, even for moments, to live wild and precious lives.

Maybe following Jesus is the work we do for money, our jobs. Helping, changing, agitating, organizing, educating.

Maybe the work we do for money is that which enables us to follow when we are not working for money. I often worry that our culture works hard to equate work and worth, work and identify. That's a mistake.

Jesus calls a rich array of people to do a rich array of things – hunger and bliss might meet in a volunteer job, or a factory job, or in parenting. It might meet from 9 to 5, but it also might meet when the work day is ended. The key is to follow; and to trust, even when both seem difficult.

How do we follow and what we are looking for are always important questions. But they seem particularly important now. In this moment, even this week, many are wondering what to do – how do I respond? How do I exercise my gifts and follow my call boldly and radically to make a difference, now?

Some of you will march. Some of you will volunteer with renewed conviction. Some of you will read an article or book, or have a conversation and be activated in a new way. Some of you will follow with crystal clarity and undaunted conviction. Some of you will stumble, hesitantly, no direction known. Some of you will work harder. Some of you will seek new work.

All I can say is remember your baptism and echo the pattern of the first disciples. Ask a simple question, receive a simple invitation, and be prepared to follow. Take the first step. There are no guarantees. But there is a promise.

“He is the Way,” Auden wrote. “Hs is the way./Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;/You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.” (*For the Time Being*) And you will. And never be the same. Amen.