

FAN OR FOLLOWER

The Scripture that was read moments ago is deceptively simple.

Once upon a time, the story goes, there are these men. They are, of course, very busy with the details of daily life, as men everywhere are, when Jesus of Nazareth approaches them. Their meeting is apparently no big deal. No bells, no whistles, no lightning bolts to mention. In fact, Jesus doesn't say much at all to them--just, "Follow me."

And--would you believe it?!--those guys, without a moment's reflection, forget about everything and do just that. They forget about their homes and families, they forget about their daily duties and personal dreams, they put their brokers and creditors and even Facebook behind them and, with apparently no further thought, they follow after him.

There is an up-side and a down-side to this scenario as we have it presented to us in these brief excerpts from the Gospel.

The up-side is that it portrays something of Jesus' remarkableness. If there is anything at all of history in these accounts, then it is probable that what these fellows are described as doing here, they wouldn't do in response to the words of just anyone. Excepting the possibility that they aren't wrapped too tight, the sense is that, if anyone other than Jesus had made this approach and said what he said, they most likely would have ignored the invitation. They would probably have thought the inviter to be himself a few marbles short of a full bag, and they would have remained right where they were in their lives. The fact that these soon-to-be disciples respond with such immediacy is testimony to some quiet, compelling power personified by Jesus.

I said that there is an up-side and a down-side.

The down-side here is that, given this perceived power on the part of Jesus, the truly radical character of Jesus' summons is apt to be lost. In our age of hero worship, his invitation is likely to be eclipsed by his reputation. What that means is that, while Jesus is seeking followers, too often, given his celebrity among us, what Jesus gets are fans. We need to be clear about the difference.

If you are a fan of Jesus, then you most likely think that he is the neatest thing to come along since low-fat yogurt or the Pentium processor. You are fascinated by what he has to say. You are impressed with how he stands up to his adversaries. You read his story enough times to be able to recite parts of it, chapter and verse, whenever the occasion arises . . . but your life is only minimally impacted by any of it.

If you are a fan of Jesus, you find yourself wishing that he were alive now so that he could be a live feature on TV. Couldn't you see him being interviewed by Wolf Blitzer or Sheppard Smith, or grilled by the likes of Jake Tapper or Sean Hannity? They'd be some memorable moments, wouldn't they? Why, the only thing better would be if Jesus actually had his own show. Move over, "Kelly and Ryan"; give way, "The Five"--Jesus' talk show is on the air! (What would Whoopie make of him, I wonder?).

With his ability to look straight through people, think of the sort of exposé that he could bring to the HD screen? No deception in the world could succeed! Why, he'd be one of the biggest attractions around. Imagine his salary, imagine the ratings, imagine the income from commercials, imagine the groupies! . . . but would he do anything more than amuse or entertain? Would he affect the quality or direction of any lives?

If you are a fan of Jesus, then you might wonder why they don't do a better job marketing him back then. Taking a cue from today's professional sports, there could have been the Jesus hats (embossed with the words

“Make the World Great Again”), the Jesus mugs, the Jesus shakers, and Jesus apparel of every imaginable sort, including the ever-popular Jesus jerseys (he’d be wearing #1, of course).

Best of all, it would have been a fabulous thing to have printed Jesus cards. We have football cards and baseball cards. Why not colorfully-wrapped packets of Jesus cards, with perhaps a small fish-shaped piece of bubble gum in each? Surely, Jesus is every bit as great as Alex Rodriguez, LeBron James, or Ben Roethlisberger (well, maybe not Ben Roethlisberger). On the back of the cards, we could include all sorts of great statistics. Besides Jesus' height and weight and date of birth (4 BC.E.), we could report such interesting career highlights as the number of miles he walked or the percentage of successful healings that he mediated.

- Imagine, card #10: "Jesus in the Temple"--a fresh-faced youth stumping the teachers and the elders, all shown with an exaggerated astonishment on their faces;
- Or card #129--"Jesus' Healing of the Demoniac," the Lord depicted in a bold pose of divine authority, reminiscent of some pitcher, immortalized for all time, in the act of throwing his best fastball;
- And who could forget the collectors' item of the series, card #275, worth \$10,000 because so few of them have been printed--just a black square covering the entire face of the card, with the caption "The Interior of the Empty Tomb."

Great ideas, I suppose . . . but would any of it substantively change lives?

This has all been fun but you get my serious point here: Where being the people of Jesus is concerned, there is an inherent foolishness in being merely a fan.

The fan is situated someplace on the outside, on the periphery, considerably distant from the hero at the center--to be sure, fascinated, impressed, admiring--but otherwise utterly unrelated to and unaffected. This is not the relationship into which Jesus invites us.

Jesus calls not for adulation or adoration but for emulation, imitation. He encourages us not merely to consider in awe what he has done but, on the basis of his model, to begin in earnest what we must do.

"Deny yourself," he says to the crowds later in Mark's gospel, "take up your own cross, and follow my lead" (8.34). Don't just be applauding me; get busy yourself! Here, let me show you the way!

The basic difference between the mere fan and the authentic follower is that the one knows all about Jesus' road, and the other personally knows the road itself.

Are you a follower of Jesus, or just another fan?

How can you be sure? Well, over the years, how much have you been changed?

Just how much of the road do you know?