

If Not Jesus, Who?
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Reformation Sunday, Next Steps 8

Exodus 16:4-8
John 6:41-69
October 30, 2016

Language has changed since the internet was started, and especially with the onslaught of social media. The word, google, for example. Do you know where it comes from? "Google" is a creative spelling of *googol* -- a number equal to 10 to the 100th power. An unfathomable number. Today, Google – spelled differently, of course – has become the name of a company. But then the word changed again, from a noun to a verb meaning *to search*, as in, "go google it." Other internet-generated words include *tweet*, which is no longer just a sound a bird makes; it is a message. *Friends* can now include people you've never met face-to-face. *Follow*: not just a physical activity but a way of tracking a topic or a person. And *unfollow*: a new word altogether, means you can disengage from conversations around that person or topic. During this political season, we might say that the word of choice is "unfollow."

If the Gospel writer, John, had to choose one word that described the scene we find in our lesson today, it would be "unfollow." In the beginning, Jesus was a hot item. Hundreds and thousands had become followers of his, showing up even in the desert, wherever Jesus was, wanting to hear him speak; hoping he would heal. He was honest and open. He spoke truth and it touched their hearts. He taught with stories they could understand. He cared about people, listening to their problems, healing, forgiving. They kept coming back for more. Jesus attracted an unfathomable number of followers – a googol, you might say.

Think about it. At the beginning of John chapter 6, Jesus had miraculously fed 5000 men with only five pieces of bread and two fish. 5000 – and that only counted the men; so with women and children, we may be talking some 10,000 people. Everyone was amazed at his power, and began to talk about making him king. This was not Jesus' plan, however, so he quietly slipped away and sent his disciples on ahead of him to the other side of the lake. Later he rejoined them in the middle of the night by walking to them – on the water – but that's a different sermon. The next day, the crowd found him and started asking, "How did you get here?" But Jesus cut to the chase, not answering their question but encouraging them to look beyond the miracles, which were, after all, merely signs to show that he was who he said he was: the Son of God. But the crowd pressed him for more miracles, referring to the manna which had been given by Moses, centuries earlier, in the desert. So Jesus started to talk about faith, not in Moses but in God. He said:

33 For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." 34 "Sir," they said, "always give us this bread." 35 Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Now, you and I are used to this kind of language, but you have to admit that it must have sounded odd to the people who first heard it. I mean, you can just hear them murmuring among themselves – "Wait a minute. We know this guy; he's from that podunk, backwater town called Nazareth. And we know his parents: Joseph and Mary. We know where he comes from – and it's pretty big stretch to call Nazareth, heaven."

And then Jesus went on to some *really* weird stuff:

53 Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.

Here's where people began to get really uncomfortable. I mean, this really is weird: eating his flesh? Drinking his blood? It sounds a lot like cannibalism. Even to our ears, hearing it said so baldly, it sounds weird. I mean, we're used to Communion language: "This is my body; this is my blood – given and shed for you." We know what happened on the cross, where he literally sacrificed his life for us. We understand something about the atonement – that by that sacrifice, you and I are saved, forgiven, set right with God. We *get it*, but you have to admit, the language Jesus used that day had to be disturbing to his hearers. People began to shake their heads as they murmured to one another, "This is just crazy. I can't go along with this." And they began to walk away. I mean, miracles, great; teachings, great; flesh and blood? Too much. *Unfollow.*

So now we're getting to the heart of the matter. People are leaving in droves. Jesus' following is dwindling to a trickle. He now turns the Twelve and asks: "You don't want to leave too, do you?" Peter, James, Philip, Nathaniel and all you guys: *Will you, too, unfollow?* It had to be an uncomfortable moment. I mean, you can't lie, right? Jesus knows your thoughts. But it's awkward. You can just imagine the disciples, wanting to step back, lean against a pillar, then sort of step into its shadow and back away, disappearing into the crowd. Jesus knows this and asks: *will you also leave?*

So, let's hit the pause button. Because this is a relevant question for all of us, at some point in our lives. The temptation to unfollow usually comes at a point of transition. You're now in junior high, or high school or college; you're in a wider circle of new friends. Your parents are no longer watching your every move. Or, you've gotten married, and your new spouse isn't all that hyped about this Jesus thing. Or, your company has transferred you to a new city -- and you just don't get around to finding a new church. Transitions. Or maybe it's a point of trouble. We've talked about this before: Believing and praying just don't seem to work; you don't know what to do. You've done all the right things but it doesn't seem to pay off. You begin to think: God's been unfaithful to me; why should I be faithful to him?

Transitions. Trouble. Or maybe it's temptation that causes you to unfollow. Philip Yancey tells of a friend, who came to him seeking advice. He was a married man with children, to all outward appearances in a good place. But, he confided, he had met another woman. Someone who made him feel alive in a way he hadn't felt in years. He was thinking of leaving his wife and family to start a new life with her. And his question for Philip was, "Will God forgive me for the terrible thing I'm about to do?"

Philip says that he regarded that question the way one would regard a live, poisonous snake. He finally said, "You are about to take a step that you know will cause hurt and harm. But you are about to take it anyway, in the hopes that someday God will forgive you. But if you take this step, you go down that path, will you even want forgiveness later on? Forgiveness, remember, assume repentance – turning around. Are you going to want that?"

See, unfollowing Jesus is not a question of whether you believe in God or whether the Bible is true. People unfollow Jesus for other reasons: it becomes inconvenient. It isolates you from your friends or from your unbelieving spouse. Or it just doesn't seem to matter after your transition, like it did before. It's not that the Bible is wrong; it's just an inconvenient truth. Your faith in Jesus kind of gets in the way. My friend, if you are in that situation, then Jesus is asking you now, today: "Will you too go away? You aren't thinking of leaving, too, are you?"

Back to the disciples, where the conversation now takes a turn. A key question is raised. Because Peter – usually the guy who keeps putting his foot in his mouth and falling on his face – Peter for once, has thought things through. He doesn't give his usual impulsive response. He realized, ok – if you unfollow Jesus, you will necessarily follow something else. Nature abhors a vacuum, you see. For you and me it could be science, technology, career, family. All good things. But something will take the place of God in your life. *Something* will become your guiding principle; something will ultimately drive your decisions. So here's the question Peter asks: *If not Jesus, who? If not a life following him, what?*

Peter had apparently been considering his options: what else is out there? You can almost read his thoughts. Yeah, it's awkward at the moment, but – *Jesus has the words of eternal life*. No one else offers that. Go back to fishing? OK, making a living is one thing. But over the past three years, my life has gained greater purpose. Life, for me, has become more than making a living, raising a family, getting to retirement. So, birth – life – death – is that all there is? No. I want more. I would rather die for something than live for nothing. I would rather live for you, Jesus, than just... die.

This is so relevant for you and me today. Because we, too, are invited into something bigger than the average life. You have been invited into a grand and glorious story, one that started at creation; which climaxed at a cross and an empty tomb. Now you are part of a great movement, one that extends throughout centuries and across the world, one empowered by the Holy Spirit. You are following the Savior of the world! So what are your options? What else could ever be so satisfying? You come to a crossroads of some kind, faced with the choices to follow or unfollow. Will you someday say, "I gave up following the Savior of the world" ... for what? A hot car? A cute babe? A fantastic salary? Beware! Because when you unfollow Jesus, you take a step back; you take a step out. If you unfollow, the day may come when you wish you could undo that action. But life is complex; you may find you can't so easily untangle the web you have woven.

So Peter makes a decision. He takes a deep breath and makes the faith statement of the year.

68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." And Peter takes his finger off the unfollow button.

So, what about you? My friends, in times of transition, trouble and temptation, do what Peter did. Hit the pause button and ask that key question. To whom shall I go? What are my options? There will always be questions and doubts. Think back to that professor, the one who once questioned your faith, offering "proof" to the contrary. I can tell you this: He may be smart and still be wrong; out of his field and thus out of his depth. It is a mistake to unfollow because, at

the moment, you don't have the right answer. Just because you don't have the right answer doesn't mean there isn't one. It only means you don't know it... yet. Is it reason to walk away? No. It is not. Because you have the person of Jesus in your life.

See, Jesus is not just showing you the way; he *is* the way. He's not just speaking words of truth; he *is* the truth. He's not just feeding you bread; he *is* the bread. He's not just giving you life; he *is* the life.

And those words we heard earlier that sounded so weird, so confusing? Here's perspective. Listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.

So, Jesus says: *Eat up! Drink up! Fill up – on Me!* That's what Jesus is saying to you, today. Remember: salvation is free; it costs you nothing. Discipleship costs you something. But unfollowing Jesus? It costs you everything.