

THE MESSAGE**Jan 17, 2010****Hebrews 12:1-13****The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller***Our Example*

I read a story about a father who decided to take his five-year-old son sled-riding. It wasn't a long walk to the hill behind their house but the 10 inches of snow that fell the night before turned the walk into a trudge. It was especially difficult for his five-year-old son, who was struggling to drag the sled behind him knee-deep in the snow. Dad looked over at him and invited his son to walk behind in his footsteps, but the boy wanted to blaze his own trail.

After a few more steps the boy stopped in his tracks, exhausted and unable to continue. He looked over at his dad and said, "Yeah, I'll follow you." The trudge became more like a walk, and the sled-riding plans changed into a backyard adventure for the two of them together.

Our reading from Hebrews today invites us to a similar yet different kind of following, and a similar yet different kind of adventure, following in the footsteps of Jesus (Read Hebrews 12:1-13).

Hebrews was written to a struggling community of faith. At one time there was excitement and enthusiasm and energy for sharing the gospel in that place. But the community was shrinking and their old life was fading away. Things were changing.

This group was disliked by the other "churches" in town (other churches didn't exist but there were other religious groups at the time). They were no longer welcomed in the synagogues. Socially, they were outcasts, which created economic hardships for them. Families were divided over the direction this new community of faith was going. Gossip and rumors spread about them all over town.

Point is, there's a price to pay when it comes to following Jesus. **WARNING** – following Jesus will cost you and I'm not just talking about 10%. If you are going to faithfully follow Jesus then expect struggles and suffering. That's certainly been my experience.

Follow Jesus and people will misunderstand your motives. They will have unrealistic expectations of you. They will make assumptions about you, gossip and spread rumors about you. People will be mean and nasty towards you, sometimes right in your face. Oddly enough... that's exactly what happened to Jesus.

He was a threat to those in power. So they decided to get rid of him by nailing him to a cross. He endured the ultimate sacrifice... the ultimate suffering... should we expect anything less in following him?

The goal of the church is to bring people under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He's the boss as we discussed last week. And if he is the boss then we exercise a certain discipline in our lives.

Jesus is our example for faithful-living. We share a deep and personal life-changing relationship with him. That's the ultimate goal of Christianity – a new life with Jesus, a new life that begins in this world and is brought to completion in the next. It's all about Jesus in this world and the next.

When it comes to this relationship with Jesus everything else is *adiaphora*. That's a great word to use with your neighbors and friends. *Adiaphora* means – “not essential for salvation.” The only thing that matters is our relationships with Jesus. He is our salvation -- everything else is *adiaphora*.

Here's what I've learned over the years... when Jesus is the head of the church, when he is in charge of our lives then all the suffering we encounter has a proper place. Living in the shadow of the cross we see suffering as a way to help us grow in the faith.

Listen to the words from St. Paul in Romans 5:3-5, “*And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*”

We are talking about character building here... becoming Christ-like. This character building isn't an easy process – it takes discipline (Paul says, suffering) which is painful. But in spite of that suffering and on the other side of that suffering, life takes on a whole new meaning and direction in the footsteps of Jesus.

Our priorities are no longer the world's priorities, but Christ's priorities for the world. Jesus loved the world even though the world was hostile towards him. The world was hostile to Jesus; so I suppose we ought not be surprised when we encounter that same hostility.

Following in Jesus' footsteps is different for each one of us because we are all different. This is not a one size fits all.

Character building.... Lifestyle.... Followership.... is the way to go. So.... what does that look like? Listen to these words from Philippians 2:1-11...

¹*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,* ²*then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.* ³*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.* ⁴*Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

⁵*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*
⁶*Who, being in very nature God,*
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
⁷*but made himself nothing,*
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
⁸*And being found in appearance as a man,*
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
⁹*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place*
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰*that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,*
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹*and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,*
to the glory of God the Father.

A few years ago the WWJD question burned across this country like a wild fire. It's still an appropriate question today. When you find yourself in a tough situation ask yourself - *What would Jesus do?* And then do it. No matter what the cost remember he took the humble servant approach and led the way. He is the pioneer and protector and perfecter of our faith. He is our perfect example for living.

What does following in his footsteps look like? Here's a two suggestion:

1. Let's engage the world around us with God's goodness and grace more and more every day. God's grace is our guide.
2. Let's continue to see the cross as a reminder that sin is heavy and weighs us down and will destroy us when we try to blaze a trail on our own.

The cross frees us to follow Jesus. It isn't easy and we will probably stumble and fall from time to time. Otherwise words like "persevere" and "endure" wouldn't be necessary. Jesus' footprints are there for us to follow. I don't know about you but sometimes weariness sets in and we want to give up. Some thing doesn't go our way and so we quit. Sometimes our heads droop and our knees become weak. Sometimes our thoughts become twisted and crooked. Sometimes we want to blaze our own trail and, before long, we're exhausted and unable to continue.

Here's the good news -- the really good news -- the Holy Spirit is here in our midst breaking into our reality with God's grace, encouraging us all the more to grow in a relationship with Jesus so that we can boldly say every day, "Yeah, Jesus I'll follow you." And we do, no matter where that journey might take us. So put your shoes on and let's follow Jesus. Amen.