

In these uncertain times, do you think God could be trying to say something to us? Jesus was repeatedly heard saying something like this: “*Whoever has ears, let them hear*” (Matthew 11:15). In the midst of this pandemic, what does God want to say to us about the way that we live our lives, physically, financially, relationally and spiritually? What could God be trying to say to us when we look to heaven and ask, “Why this? Why now? Why me?” Could this be an opportune time to learn what it means to Follow Jesus?

Let’s read 1 Peter 2:21-25. *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

This is the passage that so struck the fictional minister, Henry Maxwell, in that wonderful old Christian classic, *In His Steps* (Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1935). It’s a wonderful story. Henry Maxwell, the pastor of First Church of Raymond, Kansas, was working at home on a Friday morning, trying to put the finishing touches on his sermon for Sunday. He had been interrupted several times and was nervous about finishing. Finally, he asked his wife to “run interference” for him, and let anyone else who called know that he was exceptionally busy and could not be disturbed. But she said she was going over to the church and he would have the house to himself. So he kissed her goodbye, went back to his study to concentrate on the sermon. It was based on verse 21: “*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*” He was about to flesh out his outline when the doorbell rang, so he looked out the window to see who was there. It was a young man, very shabbily dressed.

Maxwell went to the door. The one who looked like a tramp spoke first: “I’m out of a job, Sir. I thought you might put me in the way of getting something.” “I’m sorry,” said the minister, “I really don’t know of anything. Jobs are scarce right now.” But the young man persisted. “I thought you might be able to give me a line to the city railway or the superintendent of shops, or something,” as he shifted his hat nervously from hand to hand.

But Maxwell replied, “It would be of no use. You’ll have to excuse me. I’m very busy this morning. I do hope you find something. I would offer something around here, but I’m afraid I do all the chores myself, and there really isn’t that much. I do wish you the best though.” Slowly the man turned to go and the Pastor shut the door. As he went back to his study, he looked out the window at the man going slowly down the street—hat in hand, looking dejected, forlorn, and hopeless. He really felt for him, but there was nothing he could do. Finally, Henry sat back down at his desk and resumed his work with no interruptions. When his wife returned two hours later the sermon was finished.

Sunday morning came, a bright, clear day in the town of Raymond, one of those perfect days that come after long periods of wind and rain. It was the kind of day that seemed to draw you to church, and on this day, it DID. When Henry Maxwell walked into the pulpit, he was greeted by the sight of a packed house. The music was magnificent. The choir and organist were at their best. It was inspiring. Then, it came time for the sermon. No one had ever accused Henry Maxwell of being a dull preacher. On the contrary, they had often charged him with being sensational, in the way he said what he said. But the people of First Church liked that. They enjoyed

the distinction of having a showman preacher. Henry was terrific today. The sermon was interesting, full of striking sentences, spoken with dramatic utterance that had enough good taste to never offend with ranting and raving. It was an effective message.

The sermon came to an end. Pastor Maxwell closed the large pulpit Bible on his manuscript. There was a rustling among the congregation as they prepared for the closing hymn, when suddenly, they were startled by the sound of a man's voice. It came from the rear of the sanctuary, from one of the seats under the balcony. In the next moment, the figure of a man came out of the shadow and walked down the aisle. Before the startled congregation realized what was happening, the man reached the open space in front of the pulpit and turned to face the people.

"I have been wondering since I came in here, I've been wondering, if I should say something at the close of the service. I'm not drunk and I'm not crazy. I'm perfectly harmless. But if I die, as there is every likelihood that I shall in the next couple of days, I want the satisfaction of thinking that I said my say in a place like this, and before this sort of crowd." Henry Maxwell had not taken his seat, so he remained by the pulpit looking down at the man. It was the same person who had come to his house, wearing the same clothes he had on now. He had his hat in his hand again, just as he had two days before. He had not shaved; his hair was not combed. It was doubtful that anyone like this had ever confronted the people of First Church in their sanctuary before. Of course, they had seen men like him on the street and down by the railroad yards, but they had never dreamed of being addressed by one in their house of worship.

There was nothing offensive in the man's manner or tone. "I'm not an ordinary tramp," he said, "though I don't know of any teaching of Jesus that makes one kind of tramp less worth saving than another, do you?" He put the question as naturally as if the whole congregation was a small Bible class. He paused a moment...to cough. "I'm a printer by trade, but I lost my job ten months ago. The new mechanical advances in the printing business are beautiful specimens of invention, but I know of at least six men who have killed themselves on account of those machines. I don't blame newspapers for getting them, but what can a man do? I only learned one trade and that's all I can do. I've tramped all over the country trying to find something. I'm not complaining. I'm just stating facts. There are hundreds of others like me. But I was wondering as I sat there under the balcony, if what you call FOLLOWING JESUS is the same thing as what he taught. What did he mean when he said, 'Follow me?' The minister said it's necessary for the disciple of Jesus to follow IN HIS STEPS, and he said the steps are obedience, faith, love and imitation. But I didn't hear him tell you just what Jesus said that meant, especially the last step: IMITATION. What do you Christians mean by following in the steps of Jesus?"

"I've gone all through this city for three days trying to find work, and in all that time, I have heard not a word of sympathy or comfort except from your minister here. I suppose it's because you get so imposed upon by the professional tramp that you've lost interest in any other sort. I'm not blaming anybody, just stating the facts. I know you all can't just stop what you're doing and start hunting jobs for folks like me. I'm not asking you to. But what I feel puzzled about is what is meant by FOLLOWING JESUS. What do you mean when you sing, 'I'll go with him, with him, all the way?'" Do you mean that you are suffering and denying yourselves and trying to save a lost, suffering humanity just as I understand Jesus did? Of course, I don't expect you people can prevent everyone from dying of starvation, but what does FOLLOWING JESUS mean?"

“It seems to me that there’s an awful lot of trouble in the world that somehow would not exist if people who sing such songs went and lived them out. I suppose I don’t understand something. *But what would Jesus do?* Is that what you mean by following in his steps? It seems to me sometimes that the people in the churches have good clothes and nice houses and get to go away on vacations while the people outside, the ones walking the streets for jobs, never have any really nice things and end up dying in tenements.”

Suddenly, the man lurched forward. A stir went through the congregation, but no one spoke. In a moment, the man fell heavily forward, unconscious. There were several offers to take him to various homes, but the minister insisted that he be brought to the manse. He remained unconscious. The event caused quite a sensation during the week. They noted that there was no trace of anything bitter or angry in what he had said. He had been almost apologetic in tone, almost as if *he* were the one seeking light on a difficult subject. By the time the following weekend came around, there had been a change for the worse in the man’s condition. Pastor Maxwell, on the basis of some letters found in the man’s pockets, sent for his young daughter. Sunday morning, just before 1:00 AM, the man rallied enough to ask for his little girl, and the minister was able to say that she was on her way. “I shall never see her in this world,” the man whispered, he turned his face to his host and said, “You have been good to me. Somehow I feel as if it was what Jesus would do.” After a moment, he closed his eyes, and before anyone realized it, the doctor said, “He’s gone.”

When it came time for church that morning, the sanctuary was jammed. Henry Maxwell came into the pulpit bearing the strains of the previous week, looking haggard from sitting up with the man each night. It had been many years since he had gone into church on a Sunday without any notes or sermon manuscript. He talked with considerable hesitation. It was evident that some idea was seeking expression in his mind. Finally, near the end of the sermon, he stepped to the side of the pulpit and began to talk to them of the events of the week.

“Our brother passed away this morning. I have not had time to learn all I would have liked about him. His daughter is with us now and will remain for a time. The appearance and words of this stranger last Sunday made a very powerful impression on me. I am not able to conceal from you or myself that what he said, followed as it has been by his death in my house, has compelled me to ask as I have never before asked, ‘What does FOLLOWING JESUS mean?’

“What I am going to say now is something which ought not to appear unusual or at all impossible, yet I am aware that it will probably be so regarded by many of this church. I will state it plainly. I want people who will pledge themselves, earnestly and honestly, for an entire year, not to do anything without first asking the question, ‘What would Jesus do?’ And after asking that question, each one will follow Jesus as exactly as he or she knows how, no matter what the result might be. I will, of course, include myself and shall take for granted that this church will not be surprised at my future conduct, as based on this standard of action, and will not oppose whatever is done if they think Christ would do it. Our motto will be, ‘What would Jesus do?’ Our aim will be to act just as he would if he were in our places...and we will begin today.”

The First Church of Raymond, indeed, all of Raymond, was never the same again, because a few people began to take seriously this whole idea of FOLLOWING JESUS.

Might not this “pause” in our normal lives brought on by the pandemic be the perfect time to ask what “Following Jesus” means for each of us today? Henry Maxwell did not call his people to be perfect imitators of

a sinless Savior. That would be impossible. He was simply suggesting that we try to live according to the standard set by the One whom we profess to be Lord of our lives. Amen.

(Thanks to David E. Leininger for the sermon idea from *In His Steps*)