

“What Would Jesus Have Me Do?”

Mark 1:14-20 & Mark 12:28-31

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Picture the scene: Jesus is walking along the Sea of Galilee: he sees two fishermen putting out their nets, catching fish.“Follow me,” Jesus says, “and I will help you fish for people.” Mark writes that Simon and Andrew abandon fishing suddenly, and go down the road with Jesus. A little farther along the shore, Jesus sees more fishermen, speaks to them: “follow me”....and James and John leave the nets they were mending and immediately follow Jesus.

If I walked up this aisle and said to you, “follow me,” would you leave your home and job and family and go? OK, I am clearly not Jesus....but no, we would not. We can guess what lies behind the story: perhaps they had known Jesus, had been considering joining him, and this was decision time. When guessing is done, dramatic words remain: “follow me.” Jesus is presented often as saying “follow me.”

To these fishermen beside the Sea of Galilee, to Levi the tax collector. To a reluctant disciple Jesus’ words were: “Let the dead bury their dead and come, follow me.” To the rich young ruler: “sell what you have, give to the poor and come, follow me.” And, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” These words of Jesus are disconcertingly personal...they call not for statements of belief but for response, for action.

It was popular a few years ago to wear armbands inscribed with the letters WWJD, short for “what would Jesus do?” This was intended as a guide for behavior by seeking to know what Jesus would do in any situation. Since we face circumstances and issues Jesus never faced, a more helpful question is “what would Jesus have me do?” That puts the responsibility where it belongs--on us--to decide what to do with our own gifts, our faith, our lives. What would Jesus have me do?

Mark Twain wrote: “It is not what I don’t understand in the Bible that troubles me; it is what is perfectly clear that does.” And Mark later makes Jesus’ priorities clear: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” And “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer we express the same priority: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done...” But enough of generalities: how about specific examples?

Let's begin with Ernie Campbell, then pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan, near the University of Michigan campus. After Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President Kennedy and was himself killed, his widow, Marina, needed to learn better English in order to function in this country. Ernie Campbell, the University of Michigan, and leaders in that church devised and implemented a plan. Without publicity, Marina Oswald was brought to Ann Arbor; she stayed with a family of the church, and began English classes at the university. As you might expect, word got out, and so the church and the university issued a press release stating what they were doing. Campbell said he never had received such hateful, vitriolic notes and letters and calls, condemning him and the church for assisting the widow of the President's assassin. Campbell chose to answer each one personally. In each reply he pointed out that, in all of the hateful letters and calls, one accusation had never been made: Campbell had never been accused of doing something that went against what Jesus would have led him to do. What would Jesus have me do?

A few years ago, the evangelical theologian Tony Campolo preached in the Memorial Church at Harvard University: in his sermon, he asked the congregation if they prayed for Osama bin Laden. An awkward silence followed, then some soft boo's and hisses, for we do not normally pray for such an enemy. What would Jesus have me do?

The love of God is not sentimentality but actually living Jesus' way of life. Early in his career, Billy Graham announced he would not preach to segregated audiences, and many white Christians were profoundly unhappy with him. What would Jesus have me do?

Ernest Gordon was a Scottish Presbyterian who suffered horribly as a prisoner of war during World War II. He survived unspeakable treatment in a prison camp; after the war he became chaplain of Princeton University. He became known as the man who would not hate his captors, a person who both while in prison and later lived the gospel of reconciliation between people. He was not trying to be heroic; he was trying to do what Jesus would have him do.

What would Jesus have me do? Keeping that question front and center will bring life as we are created to be!

What was fascinating was that the answers seemed to depend on the convictions of the person asking the question: both religious conservatives and liberals assumed that Jesus would behave as they did, that he would share their convictions and practices.