

WGUMC June 15, 2014 Matthew 16:21-25
"And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord"

If I asked an evangelical Christian what it meant to believe "in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord," she would probably ask me if I had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. For many believers, having a "personal relationship" with our Savior is the very definition of being a Christian. What is odd about this is that evangelicals, who claim to get everything from the Bible, talk about being a Christian with language that never appears in the Bible.

Now, if the phrase didn't come from the Bible, where did it come from? I didn't know, so I Googled it. We can do that because Google has digitized millions of books over the past ten years or so and put them online in a searchable database. With its Ngram Viewer, you can search for a phrase among this vast library of books and then graph the frequency of its use over a long period of time. So I discovered someone had already done that for me. David Murrow had searched for

"personal relationship with Jesus" and found that the phrase first appeared in a book in 1881. It wasn't used much in the decades after that, except during the two world wars. But then the phrase really took off with the evangelical renewal of the 1960's and 70's. [www.patheos.com/blogs/afewgrownmen/2013/07/why-we-call-it-a-personal-relationship-with-jesus/]

As I was studying the graph, it occurred to me that the emphasis on having a personal relationship with Jesus had to be, at least in part, a response to the times. Think about what was happening in the 60's and 70's. We were in a crisis, weren't we? Our consumer culture was deadening. Big government and big business were depersonalizing. Racial tensions were dividing. The Vietnam War was devastating. Young men were dying. In many ways and on many levels, it felt like we were losing, if not our lives, then our sense of self, and we were desperate to regain it.

Remember EST and Transcendental Meditation and Consciousness-raising groups? This intense focus on the self

wasn't entirely healthy, but it gave the Church an opportunity. While pop culture and pop psychology were saying that the individual person is all-important, the Church said, yes, but the person who is most important is Jesus Christ. You will never find yourself unless you find Jesus.

So when the churches adopted the language of personal relationships, they were speaking to a deep psychological and spiritual need. And for many people, it worked. But forty and fifty years out, some are rethinking the message.

Christian leaders today are asking hard questions. We still very much live in a me-first society. And in our efforts to make Jesus accessible, did we make him *too* personal? What I'm afraid of is that we downsized him: Jesus the majestic has become Jesus the domestic. And now that he fits neatly in our pockets, does he still have the power to feed the poor, stop the war and save the world. And do we still care?

In our sincere attempt to claim him for our own, did we end up remaking him in our image? Doesn't Jesus look a little too much like us? And haven't we fooled ourselves into thinking that he wants the things that we want?

That was Peter's problem. When Jesus started talking about going up to Jerusalem and suffering and dying there, Peter didn't want to hear it. That wasn't a part of Peter's plan. That wasn't acceptable in terms of Peter's personal relationship with Jesus. He said, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." What Peter meant was, "This must never happen to me." And, of course, it's all about me!

But Jesus could see that Peter was trying to make him be who Peter wanted him to be, and he called him on it: "You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

When we think we know Jesus personally, it's tempting to think we understand him fully and can manage him easily. That

was Peter's mistake and it's often ours. So today let's try to put our mind on divine things rather than human things. Let's leave aside our personal relationship with Jesus, if we have one, and talk about what it means to say, "I believe...in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord." And to do that, let's turn to what the Bible has to say.

I think you'll find that it's pretty clear. To be a Christian means simply to follow Jesus. Listen to the language of Scripture: "And he said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.'" [Matthew 4:19] "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." [John 10:27]

And what does it mean to follow Jesus? It isn't really about the words we use, but the things we do. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." [Matthew 7:21] I know plenty of folks who talk about their personal relationship with Jesus but don't live or love like

they've ever met him. They think they know Jesus, but they don't know how to live his words: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." [Matthew 16:24]

When I read these verses about following Jesus in the Bible, the relationship that comes to my mind is the one that we all learned when we played follow the leader. The only problem is that kids are a lot better at playing that game than grown-ups are. So we need to invite the kids to come forward now and show us how.

[Children's time: Follow the leader game.]

The kids reinforce for me that the Bible doesn't say that we have to have certain feelings for Jesus. We are all different people, and we have all kinds of different thoughts and feelings about him. To believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, all we have to do is follow him. But it's not a child's game, because to follow Jesus we have to do what children are hard

pressed to do: we have to deny ourselves. John Wesley put it this way, "let [us] deny [our] own will, however pleasing, and do the will of God, however painful." [from his *Notes Upon the New Testament* for Matthew 16:24]

That is our challenge as followers of Jesus: to leave the 60's and 70's (and 80's and 90's...) and lose our unhealthy obsession with ourselves—our own wants and needs—and focus on what God wants and what others need. What the culture will never teach us but Christ can is that if you empty yourself of yourself, you will be filled up with God. And when that happens, my friends, we are in heaven. "and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

But I can't lie to you. Following Jesus is going to mean suffering. It's not that we go looking for it. We don't have to. When you are following Jesus, suffering will find you. Yes, doing the will of God can be painful.

Yet there is amazing grace even in suffering. Wesley said that all our crosses are opportunities to embrace God's will at the expense of our own will. Every time we take up a cross, every time we return good for evil or speak a word of blessing rather than of blame or choose to forgive and go on; every time we give our strength to the weak or give our riches to the poor or give our heart to the hurting, we take a step toward perfection in love. And the more we make a habit of it, the more we progress in our spiritual life. The big crosses bring big blessings. But lots of little crosses, the ones that come to us every single day, can have the same cumulative effect. [from his *Notes Upon the New Testament* for Matthew 16:24]

What I'm saying is that it isn't enough just to say that we have a personal relationship with Jesus. And that may not be the language you use to talk about your faith in him at all, and that's ok. Not even the Bible uses it. I know of men who think that all the talk of intimate relationships with Jesus has turned

the church into a chick flick. Now that isn't fair, but those of us who have a deep personal relationship with Jesus do have to make room for those who don't relate to Jesus in that way.

The bottom line is that whatever words we use or thoughts we have, if we believe that Jesus Christ is God's only son and our Lord, we will let him lead and we will follow him. By the grace of God, so be it.