

“Be As If?” (24Jan21)
Mark1:14-20; 1Cor7:29-31

What does it mean to be a Christian, to follow after Jesus?

Probably a primary sense is doing good. This time of year, our Confirmation class would typically be stocking shelves at the Lussier Center food pantry. I’ve heard some talk about handing on your \$600 stimulus payments to help others. Following Jesus may involve such sharing and acting benevolently.

Or we might reframe that as love. They’ll know we are Christians by our love. Maybe in attitudes and efforts for the vulnerable, or clinging to close relationships, or loving even our enemies?

Another notion to follow Jesus is doing justice, and Christians should be against racism or for criminal justice reform or LGBTQ inclusion. Those sound good. Of course, others claim the justice issues as abortion or government intrusion.

From today’s Gospel reading, being Christians and fishing for people could mean catching them, pulling them into the church. Evangelizing or recruiting. Not a definition we do well at wanting to claim or practice even with invitations.

Still, that may tie to a concept of being a Christian as being saved, often meaning a heavenly destination. Some sense of that may appear in our 2nd reading: “The time we live in will not last long. While it lasts, mourners should be as if they had nothing to grieve them.”

The time we will live in will not last long. Or, in another version, “time is growing short.” You may take that as being nearer to the heavenly promise. Maybe just as by the minute not-getting-any-younger. Or like Norman Thayer in “On Golden Pond,” after his wife Ethyl said they’re a middle-aged couple, the 79-year old responding “People don’t live to 150! You’re old, and I’m ancient!” However the age feels, you may take confidence in awaiting God’s promise.

And yet, for time not lasting long, I argue against the next phrase from the reading: “while it lasts, mourners should be as if they had nothing to

grieve them.” If that’s what following Jesus means, I can’t do it.

With too-short time, mournfulness lately has been inundating, and it sure doesn’t feel as if we have nothing to grieve, with the deaths of Jean Loichinger, Mary Maxwell, and now Jean Oliverson. Any one of those an enormous loss for our community, and now all three. I’m not sure our congregation has ever been through a month like this.

We may feel some assurance in a heavenly promise for them. But I’m still sad that they’re not with us.

We may focus on how kind and loving they were, as saintly examples for us of true Christians. That doesn’t make me miss them any less, but probably more.

Or for the evangelization model of following Jesus, maybe grieving these three shouldn’t matter because the main point is reaching those who aren’t yet in the church.

But we are community. We are beloved community. And the message needs to be for us. We need good news.

We further notice it’s not just mournful with their deaths, but that we’re not together. It was pointed out when Bob Sessions died last autumn that when we *are* able to regather, some won’t be with us. I felt so much for Ken Maxwell before the memorial service, walking through the doors for the first time without Mary, but also without the rest of you. The loss, what’s missing, will continue to be felt. There’s no way to acclimate and become accustomed to the absences, missing their presence. It’s not just each loss, but is compounded in so many ways over these months. As I say: Stupid pandemic. We don’t get to deal with our grief, at least not in our usual rhythms, risking our sorrows to be not only postponed but ignored.

I don’t think 1st Corinthians was indicating we should get over it and pretend nothing were wrong, sweeping it under the rug. That won’t help.

Before inauguration events, I know some of you found it helpful this week for our nation to pause and grieve, observing nearly unfathomable loss. Yes, in the disruptions of our daily lives. But

also in the rupture of life, period, 400,000 who died so far from COVID-19. Even saying it's more deaths in the US than in World War 2 is mostly incomprehensible in catastrophic scale.

First Corinthians can't tell us to be as if we're not sad, as if there's no reason to recognize and admit the tragedy. The President-elect said that evening at the Reflecting Pool that "to heal, we have to remember."

Of course, the collective casualties, the deaths of Mary and the Jean twins in our congregation are only part of it. Your other griefs also need to be mourned. For me, the death of a key mentor in my life this week meant I needed memories and feelings of who Tim Scott had been for me. To remember in order to heal. Or maybe not heal, but just to mourn.

If 1st Corinthians seems problematic, I prefer other places where Paul writes that we may grieve, but not "like those who have no hope" (1Thes4:13). He opens his second letter to the Corinthians by acknowledging sufferings, with an extension that they enable us to console each other "with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God" (2Cor1:4). That's a better sense than imagining as if we don't grieve. But this isn't just trying for a positive spin of side benefits.

Another type of a bigger picture is to notice the sad loss, but also the happy things. It may help you to take the good and take the bad. Or that may just be the facts of life.

Still larger is the sweep of your life in God's frame and plan. Maybe today we can at least take Paul to mean that how we define, and therefore have limited, life needs to be set in God's broader context.

So over and against our standard categories, you are not defined by whether you are depressed or pleased as punch. Not defined by your age and proximity to death. Not defined by marital relationship or if you're single. Not defined by rich or poor. Not defined by being under empire or by your vocation, as Jesus illustrated in the Gospel calling. Not even defined by how loving you are, how good of an evangelist you are, the side of justice you stand on.

We know the world has been defined in that way, by ins and outs and how you can prove yourself. It's an elusive hunt for success, the abundance of possessions or the right relationships or health or happiness or achievements. But Paul proclaims that's passing away. The world like that is coming to its end.

That's not proximity to the end times, as if Paul was mostly talking about the apocalypse or the end of the world. This present ways of the world are passing away because we know the old limiting definitions are not true. Everything is redefined, not because of your proximity to heaven at the end, but because of your proximity to God. Or, to say it better, that God in Jesus has come close to you. The kingdom of God has come near. You're ultimately defined simply because God has come to be in relationship with you. And that's good news. It makes a difference forever and for now.

Even when the times are hard and sad and mournful. That is not all they are. You are invited to turn from the old limited definitions and turn toward the good news. Here it is. Here God is.