

September 13, 2015
6 Decisions
The Decision to Follow
John 1:35-42

Opening words: Blogger John Reitmer attended a seminar nearly ten years ago in St. Paul, Minnesota. The topic was the human brain and how we make decisions. According to the speakers, the average person makes more than 35,000 decisions in a single day. Most of them are rather simple. Where to sit, what to eat at the next meal, what lane to drive in. These decisions are easily made and have very little consequences. Other decisions are more serious with long lasting effects.

Tom Berlin is the Senior Pastor of the Floris United Methodist Church in Herndon, Virginia. He says each Christian must make six major decisions in their lifetime. These decisions should not be made without some thought, because their consequences are eternal. He outlined these six decisions in his book, 6 Decisions that will Change Your Life. This morning we look at the first major decision each Christian must make, *the decision to follow*. Our scripture lesson for today is John 1:35-42.

John 1:35-42 ³⁵The next day John was there again with two of his disciples.
³⁶When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"
³⁷When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. ³⁸Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?"
They said, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?"
³⁹"Come," he replied, "and you will see."
So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.
⁴⁰Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. ⁴¹The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). ⁴²And he brought him to Jesus.
Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).

It is impossible not to know the name C. S. Lewis (1898-1963). Do you know his story? As a novelist, poet, lecturer and Christian apologist, he held academic posts at both Oxford and Cambridge for decades. Yet, he was a blessing to both the academic and non-academic worlds. His Christian faith can be seen in all of his classic literary works. Perhaps, you have read or heard of one of these: *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Space Trilogy*, *Mere Christianity*, *Miracles* and *The Problem of Pain*. It is interesting to note that there was a long period in his life when he believed in nothing at all. In his memoir, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis told how he was baptized into the Church of Ireland, but the sacrament had no influence on him. He walked away from the faith and didn't come back until he was 32. He thanked his friends, including

J. R. R. Tolkien, for his spiritual awakening. Who do you credit for your spiritual awakening? Who do you credit for saving your soul? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

We begin our sermon series in the first chapter of John. It is obviously early in Jesus's ministry. It is so early in Jesus's ministry that Jesus doesn't have a single disciple. That is about to change. According to the text, John the Baptist was with his disciples, when Jesus passes by. John the Baptist, who always was pointing toward Jesus and away from his own earthly success, identified Jesus as the Lamb of God. With this endorsement, two of John's disciples leave him and follow Jesus. The Bible identifies one of the disciples as Andrew; tradition identifies the other disciple as John, the author of this Gospel. Seconds later, Jesus notices that they are following him and asks them why. It is an excellent question because no one likes to be stalked. They answer Jesus's question with another question, "Where are you staying?" Jesus answers that question with an invitation, "Come and you will see." They accepted the invitation and stayed with him. They must have been impressed. They stayed with Jesus until about 4:00 in the afternoon. At that time, the two temporarily left Jesus and told others about him. Andrew told his brother Peter, who decided to follow Jesus too. In this story, three people decided to follow Jesus. In each case their lives wouldn't be the same again. That leads me to an interesting question.

When did you first decide to follow Jesus? No two stories are the same. No one's story is better or worse than another's story. Your story is just that, your story. Your story may include loving parents who sacrificed for you. They took you to church every week so you could know Jesus as your own. For this reason, Sunday school was not an option, it was a requirement. When your heart was just right, God spoke to you in just the right way. You decided to follow Jesus. The people in your life never saw a great change and your story was not exciting. I like those non-exciting stories because it sounds so much like mine. Or maybe, your story is exciting. There was a surplus of sex, drugs and rock and roll. Maybe your story included long periods away from loved ones. To the outside world you were living the life. However, you knew the truth. You were miserable and your heart was restless. You didn't like the person you had become. When you hit your lowest point, God spoke to you. It was an incredible experience. You were born again! That was a good thing, because you wanted to start your life over again. The people in your life couldn't believe the change. They had grown tired of the old you and wanted to get to know the new you. Can I tell you the truth? It doesn't really matter how you came to follow Jesus. The only thing that matters is that you decided to follow Jesus.

In the scripture lesson for today, following Jesus looks simple. Andrew and John are with John the Baptist. John identifies Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, so they begin to follow Jesus. Hours later, Andrew tells his brother, Peter, and he begins to follow Jesus. Their decision to follow Jesus seems easy. I can't speak for them, I can't speak for you. I can only speak for myself. In my opinion, the decision to follow Jesus isn't

easy. It is very complex. Are you following Jesus **exclusively**? If you are, then you'd better be prepared for conflict. Following Jesus exclusively means you are only following Jesus. Only following Jesus means you are telling the world that you believe Jesus is your only hope of salvation. In other words, you are telling other world religions and philosophies they are wrong. No one likes hearing they are wrong. Are you following Jesus **unconditionally**? It is easy to follow Jesus when life is good; it is not so easy to follow Jesus when life is hard. It is hard to believe in Jesus when you are surrounded by problems. Are you following Jesus **passionately**? In other words, are you willing to let Jesus change you? The faith is not meant to be a Sunday morning experience, the faith is meant to be an everyday life-altering experience. It sounds so easy. Andrew, John and Peter followed Jesus. The truth is, following Jesus is really quite complex. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Do you follow Jesus exclusively?

Friday was the fourteenth anniversary of the sadness of September 11th. Where were you when you got the news? Kathryn and I were still living on West Main in Canfield. The girls were in school and I was getting ready to stain our deck. Kathryn stuck her head out of the door and said, "You need to watch this." I came in and sat down. I saw our world change in front of my eyes. America was attacked by terrorists in three places, western Pennsylvania, New York City and Washington DC. Our national innocence was gone, and we entered a new, sinister world. The painful truth became common knowledge. America was under attack by extreme members of the Islamic faith. On September 11, those terrorists wanted the world to know that the Muslim faith was the only way. They frustrate us for many reasons. One of the reasons is their narrowness. If you are going to follow Jesus, then you are telling the world that Jesus is the only way. Some may call us narrow. Look at the story with me.

In the story, Andrew and John begin as disciples of John the Baptist. Don't forget, John the Baptist was their rabbi or teacher; Andrew and John were his disciples or students. In other words, he gave them spiritual insight and direction. When John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, they listen to him because they trusted him. This story is incredible because Andrew and John turned their backs on John the Baptist to follow Jesus. They were going to follow Jesus exclusively. Are you following Jesus exclusively? Are you willing to tell the rest of the world they are wrong? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Do you follow Jesus conditionally?

One of the great stories in the Bible can be found in the Book of Job. Everyone knows the story, because everyone has played the part of Job. In the beginning he has everything, wealth, health and relationships. Satan believes Job's love for God is conditional, so he begins to take things away from Job. His wealth is taken away. His health is taken away. His loved ones are taken away. His friends witness his ordeal and encourage him to curse God and die. Job refuses.

How many people do you know who follow Jesus conditionally? It is easy to follow Jesus when life is good. It is easy to follow Jesus when you have a well-paying job that you enjoy. It is easy to follow Jesus when your health is good and your loved ones' health is good. It is easy to follow Jesus when all your relationships are sound. It is not so easy to follow Jesus when you are unemployed, sick and alone. It is not so easy to follow Jesus when your friends tell you to stop following Jesus. After all, we believe in an all-powerful God who resurrected Jesus from the dead. Have you ever wondered why our all-powerful God doesn't help you? Do you follow Jesus conditionally? Do you follow Jesus unconditionally? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Do you follow Jesus passionately?

In the scripture lesson for today, three people decided to follow Jesus. There was Andrew, John and Peter. They did not have a clue how much Jesus would change their lives. They followed Jesus because they wanted to change their lives. You can't blame them, because their lives were hard. Any change seemed to be better. However, they didn't have a clue how much their lives were going to change. They followed Jesus until the very end of their lives. Only John died of old age. Yet, he experienced the isolation of Patmos because he refused to stop following Jesus. Peter followed Jesus to Rome and was crucified upside down because he wasn't worthy to die like Jesus. Andrew was crucified on an x-shaped cross. Each one wanted a change and they got it.

How far are you willing to follow Jesus? I know many who use Jesus to promote their own ideas and beliefs. I hope we are people who are open to change. The reason is simple. Our agenda in life doesn't really matter. The only thing that really matters is Jesus's agenda. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

On December 16th of last year, I celebrated my fortieth anniversary. It was not my wedding anniversary. It was my fortieth anniversary of deciding to follow Jesus. No one, except me and God, remembered the occasion. There wasn't a special party, dinner or cake. I didn't receive a single card. However, I consider December 16, 1974, as a pivotal day in my life. The story is not exciting, but it is my story. I was a senior in high school and my heart was restless. Church had played such a large part of our family's life, but I didn't quite get it. There is no other way to say it, a revival had broken out within my youth group and I was on the outside looking in.

In 1974, the school levy had failed in Warren, so the schools shut down in early December due to a lack of funding. That gave me a surplus of free time. Our youth group was selling Christmas trees in the church parking lot, so I spent countless hours there. The best friends I have ever had were in that youth group. We spent the majority of December 1974 acting silly together. On that magic day, one of the people who came to sell Christmas trees was Susan. She was the prettiest girl in the group and I was smitten. I hung on every word she spoke. For a few moments we were there alone. She looked at me and asked, "Russ, would you like to go to heaven?" My heart began to pound because she was talking to me. I would have gone anywhere with her.

I would have gone to the dump to shoot rats, just to be with her. I answered yes, and she told me about Jesus. Susan's question, do you want to go to heaven, changed my life. On that day, I decided to follow Jesus. It seemed easy at the time, but it became very complex. However, I will say this, following Jesus has been the best decision I have ever made.

You don't have to tell me, I know it. I have a great life! I am married to a wonderful woman who has shown me the world. I have independent, self-sufficient children, who I respect. I have a granddaughter who is full of promise and potential. I own my own home and have a job that aligns with my purpose. I have had some wonderful experiences in the past and look forward to some wonderful adventures in the future. I hesitate to say this, but my life is close to perfect. God has been good to me and I can trace all those good things back to the day I decided to follow Jesus. I am doing things I could not have imagined. Do you think Susan, the prettiest girl in my high school youth group, changed my life with her question, "Russ, would you like to go to heaven." The best thing I have done in my life is decide to follow Jesus. When did you start following Jesus?