

St. Mary's Episcopal Church
June 11, 2023

Message by Rev. Michael Burke
Hosea 5:15-6:6; Romans 4:13-25 ; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26



Follow Me

Am I following Jesus, or just believing in Christ?
'Cause I can believe and not change a thing
But following will change my whole life.

- Bryan Sirchio, "Follow Me")

Wow! There is a lot in the scripture appointed for today. Because of the way the Sunday lectionary, that three-year cycle of readings, is set up, and that Easter moves around on the calendar, we haven't actually had this particular set of readings since June of 2008.

There is more here than we can process in ten minutes, beginning with Hosea, one of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. This passage is part of a larger piece in which the relationship between God and humanity is portrayed in an extended metaphor, that at times reads like a sad duet of a country song. In short, in "Facebook relationship status" language, "it's complicated."

It is included in the readings for today because it is a small portion of this passage that Jesus later quotes in the Gospel according to Matthew, in which Jesus makes the point that God does not want empty rituals of religious observance without a deep and abiding ethic of steadfast love toward God and loving mercy toward one's fellow human beings.

As I was trending to my backyard garden this weekend, I stumbled across a helpful example, right there in front of me. Last year at this time, I had purchased three apple trees from Costco. All three looked the same, and they had all budded out with leaves and flowering buds. And all three did well, for about three weeks. After that, one tree mysteriously died, while the other two grew and prospered. I set the dead tree, still in its original pot aside in the back of the yard and forgot about it. As I was cleaning up yesterday, I emptied it out so I could reuse the pot, and there was a surprise. The "tree" was, literally, just a stalk. When they dug it up from wherever it had been growing at the nursery, they had cut the root clean through about eight inches beneath the ground surface and potted it up. But there were no roots. None. Just a bare stick, cut clean through at the bottom. The leaves lasted just long enough for the tree to be sold to some unsuspecting would-be gardener, (me,) and it died in my yard before the end of June.

Think of our religious observances and worship and service as being the growth of flower buds and leaves and fruit. They are often the outward and visible *indicators* of a healthy spiritual relationship with God, with our neighbors, and with ourselves.

But the real test of viability of our faith is if there is a healthy root system that will sustain those leaves and flowers and fruit over time. But a healthy network of roots and all the magic of nutrient exchange and water movement that happens for a tree under the surface is hard to see without some digging around.

Costco, for example, would not have been pleased with me, if I uprooted each apple tree to inspect its root system before making a purchase. I looked instead at the upper part of tree, as any reasonable person would. But in one case out of three, I got fooled, and now I have a dead stick and an extra pot.

Hosea, and Jesus, in quoting him, remind us that outward religious observance (or "sacrifice," in the language of the reading,) is a wonderful thing, if it really *is* evidence of a flourishing relationship with God. But if it is just *showy*, and for its own sake, with no depth or root structure, it will wither and pass away in due season.

Similarly, in the Epistle for today, in Paul's letter to the church at Rome, Paul is making an analogous comparison between *faith* (or, in the words of the passage, "the righteousness of faith," by which, I believe, he means actually "doing right" by God and toward others. Being steadfast in your love and relationship with God and steadfast in your love and relationship with your neighbor. Or as the prophet Micah wrote: Act justly, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8). If you do those things, you will *fulfill the law*, and then your rituals and observances bear fruit and bring forth abundant life. But the reverse is not necessarily the case: you can perform all the outward rituals and observances of the law and still have no "roots," no depth of relationship, no genuine love for yourself, God, or your neighbor. No sense of justice-making and mercy. No matter how many church services you attend or

3

how many pious sounding memes and scripture passages that you post on social media, if you don't have love, as it says in I Corinthians 13, you are just a noisy gong or a clanging symbol, to no real end. You are a dead stick in a used pot in the back corner of my backyard by the shed. Ouch! Back to Hosea again: "For I desire steadfast love and *not* sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:6).

Are you with me still? Let us pop over to Matthew's Gospel. Matthew is sitting by the side of the road, in a tax collecting booth, perhaps on the path leading up from the lake where the fisherman pass by with their catch for the market.

He is a much-derided collector of taxes for the imperial Roman authority, folks who were despised by the people for their dishonesty and their exploitation of the common people. In the Gospel according to Matthew, his name is Matthew, the Greek version of the same Hebrew name "Levi," which is what he is called in Mark and Luke's Gospels.

I'd love to know the backstory here. Had Jesus and Matthew run into one another previously? We'll never know, I suppose. Jesus just says "follow me," and Matthew, seemingly inexplicably, gets up and follows. Luke says "He left *everything* and followed him".

Now, pay attention to what happens next: Mark and Luke tell us that Matthew has Jesus follow *him* over to his place for dinner. And Matthew has invited all his friends from work: a large group of fellow tax collectors and so-called "sinners." Which immediately gets the attention of the proper religious gatekeepers, who are either genuinely curious or scandalized, depending on how you read the text.

When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" (There is that passage from Hosea again). "For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." Then... Then!...

The dinner is interrupted by a synagogue official whose daughter has just died, "but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus got up and followed him, (There is a lot of "following" happening, as though the writer of the Gospel is trying to tell us something.)

But they don't even get to the official's house, when "suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well."

OK, Wow! Are you still with me? Notice this: When Matthew wants to tell us something in the Gospel story, he has Jesus do something significant, and then, in what comes next, we learn what that "something" means. The deeper meaning.

So Jesus calls Matthew "Come, follow me." And then, there is a dinner with all the "wrong" people, people shamed and excluded and marginalized, who are the first century Palestinian cultural opposite of the holy, pious, proper, so-called "respectable people." And then a healing and a resuscitation, a bringing back to life. All in the face of stark human need.

Jesus said, "Follow me." And then, in action that speaks a thousand words: this is what "following me" looks like.

Steadfast love and mercy. Human dignity. For everyone, synagogue officials and so-called "sinners," alike. To live today, in the here and now, as if justice had already begun to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). To lean into – to live into - the Kingdom or Reign of God, which, as Jesus repeatedly said is "very near," or "within."

Notice too, what isn't there: Jesus doesn't quiz people on their theology or doctrine. He doesn't make them sign a dogmatic statement of faith. He doesn't ask for their church membership records. (Not, of course, that there is anything wrong with that!)

Certainly, both the synagogue official and the woman-in-need show some faith, but it is a deeply human kind of faith. Even a desperate, seeking, gut-wrenching kind of faith.

In other words, it is faith of *real things*. Faith with *enduring* buds and flowers and fruit. But it has enduring buds and flowers and will bear fruit *because it has roots*. Real authentic roots in human struggle. And roots in a *right relationship* with God and with one's neighbors and with oneself.

That's enough for this morning. I'm going to leave it right there. But there is a guy named Bryan Sirchio who has a song that has been running through my head all week. I'll leave you at least the lyrics, and it goes like this:

I met this preacher from Australia
 He read the Bible searching for its dominant themes
 And he counted 87 times when Jesus said... "Follow me."
 Well you know that got me thinking
 Maybe that's the bottom line of what "Christian" means
 'Cause "I follow Jesus" is deeper than "I believe"
 'Cause it don't take much to mentally agree
 With a set of beliefs written down in some creed
 Now don't get me wrong,
 we need to know what we believe
 But lately I've been wondering...

(Chorus)

Am I following Jesus, or just believing in Christ
'Cause I can believe and not change a thing
But following will change my whole life
He never said, come, acknowledge my existence
Or believe in me I'm the 2nd person of the Trinity
But 87 time he said... Follow me

But if I'm a follower of Jesus,
Then why am I such a good life insurance risk?
And why, when I do my giving,
do I still keep so much when so much hunger exists?
And if I follow Jesus, then why do I have so many friends
among the affluent, and so few among the poor?
And if I follow Jesus,
why do missiles and guns make me feel more secure?
And it don't take much to mentally assent
To a statement of faith we can confirm and forget
But following will change our lifestyle if we get it and
more and more I'm wondering...

Are we following Jesus? Or just believing in Christ?
'Cause we can believe, and not change a thing
But following will change our whole life
He never said, come, acknowledge my existence
Or believe in me, I'm your first class ticket to eternity...
But 87 times he said... Follow me...

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Scripture appointed for today:

The Collect

O God, from whom all good proceeds: Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by your merciful guiding may do them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament - Hosea 5:15-6:6

Thus says the Lord: "I will return again to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face. In their distress they will beg my favor: 'Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.' What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early. Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have killed them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

The Psalm - Psalm 50:7-15

7 Hear, O my people, and I will speak:
"O Israel, I will bear witness against you; *
for I am God, your God.

8 I do not accuse you because of your sacrifices; *
your offerings are always before me.

9 I will take no bull-calf from your stalls, *
nor he-goats out of your pens;

10 For all the beasts of the forest are mine, *
the herds in their thousands upon the hills.

11 I know every bird in the sky, *
and the creatures of the fields are in my sight.

12 If I were hungry, I would not tell you, *
for the whole world is mine and all that is in it.

13 Do you think I eat the flesh of bulls, *
or drink the blood of goats?

14 Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving *
and make good your vows to the Most High.

15 Call upon me in the day of trouble; *
I will deliver you, and you shall honor me."

The Epistle - Romans 4:13-25

The promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

The Gospel - Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me."

And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Other Voices;

From Working Preacher, for June 11, 2023:

- There is no preparation in the text that proceeds Matthew's calling. No seminary degree. God does not necessarily call the fully equipped. God equips the called.
- So it may be with the church's ministry: sometimes we go forth and identify ourselves with those on the margins; in other cases the needs of others draw the church beyond its comfortable boundaries. Like the Jesus of the First Gospel, the church needs to cultivate the art of following.
- Jesus says the healthy do not need a physician while the sick do, that he has come to call not the righteous but sinners (9:13). Yet Jesus' companionship with sinners appears to be just that, companionship and not treatment. Jesus has many harsh words to say in the First Gospel, but he directs none of them at sinners. His inaugural message is a call to repent (4:17), and he denounces the cities he has visited for failing to repent (11:20-21; 12:41). He pronounces woe against the scribes and the Pharisees (chapter 23). But in the First Gospel Jesus not once reproves sinners. He does not criticize them. He does not demand their repentance. He simply eats and drinks with them. (This is true of the entire Gospel tradition, except for the story of the Adulterous Woman, which was inserted into John's Gospel long after its composition.)
- To be truly righteous is to reflect the face of God; and to find righteousness within ourselves we have to **look inward** and then seek **God in an outward way**.

From "Tax Collectors and Sinners (Luke 5:27)," by Dr. Ralph F. Wilson¹

Tax collectors (KJV "publicans") probably weren't numbered among the poor. Their profession, if it could be called that, made many of them wealthy.

Rome's method of collecting taxes was to employ as tax collectors locals who knew who had money and where they kept it. A province was divided into tax districts. Locals would bid for the contract of collecting taxes in a district. The bid was the money they were contracted to pay the government; whatever they collected over that amount was theirs to keep. The chief tax collector (such as Zacchaeus in Luke 19:2) owned the contract for his region. Then he would employ others to collect taxes in the various villages. Tax collectors were widely regarded as thieves and robbers. Perhaps the Jews told "tax collector jokes" the same way we tell "lawyer jokes," we don't know.

¹ See; <https://www.jesuswalk.com/luke/013-levi.htm> Copyright © 2023, Ralph F. Wilson. <pastor@joyfulheart.com> All rights reserved.

Rome collected three principal kinds of taxes, (1) a land tax, (2) a head tax, and (3) a customs tax of 2% to 5% of value on goods being transported. A tax office or booth would be located near a city gate or port to collect the custom tax, though liability for this tax would have been primarily limited to those engaging in commercial trade to other areas¹²³ -- such as fishermen exporting dried fish or farmers shipping surplus crops to a larger city. If ancient Capernaum is to be identified with the ruins at Tell Hum (as I believe it should be), then the customs house would have collected revenue on the produce of the area, as well as traffic that moved eastward along the road to Bethsaida Julias.¹²⁴

Tax collectors were hated men. When I lived in Southern California, I had a next door neighbor who was pretty vague about what he did for a living. "I work for the federal government," he told me at first. It turns out that he worked for the Internal Revenue Service, but was afraid to let it be known lest he be ostracized by us and other neighbors. Back then, the IRS wasn't as domesticated as it is supposed to have become. Back then, the IRS could seize your records and money first and ask questions later. Back then, the taxpayer was guilty until he could prove himself innocent. The IRS was nasty. No wonder my neighbor was vague.

But if the IRS can be distrusted in the US, think what it was like in Jesus' day. All a tax collector would have to do is threaten to report a person to the soldiers of Herod or Rome, and he could take what he wanted by extortion. This was a police state, and residents didn't have many civil rights unless they were citizens of Rome. Few were.

Rome itself was hated. Its troops occupied the sacred land, with a garrison even quartered at the northwest corner of the holy Temple precincts in the Fortress of Antonia. Roman justice may be honored by wistful classicists twenty centuries later, but close up, the Romans were the oppressors, the takers, the enforcers. They were hated.

Tax collectors who collaborated with the hated Romans were despised even more. They were viewed as traitors, turncoats, quislings. They worked for the enemy out of greed, a greed that sucked the people dry. Jesus' words about those who reject church discipline suggest the way tax collectors were regarded:

"If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:17).

Tax collectors, wealthy as they might be, were shunned.

To eat with a Gentile or tax collector was considered by the strict Pharisees to render one spiritually or ceremonially unclean. Uncleanness was conveyed by touch and association. Even a house entered by a tax collector was considered unclean.¹²⁵ Tax collectors were both hated and avoided by respectable society.

So these *nouveaux riches* were considered beneath contempt -- but they did have friends. Other "sinners" might include Gentiles who lived in the community. They wouldn't be welcome in strict Jewish homes, but the tax collectors, already rejects themselves, readily accepted them. The term "sinner" was also used

to designate individuals who didn't keep rules of purity as strictly as what was considered the standard. The Pharisees probably looked at a great portion of Jewish society as "sinners," since they didn't share Pharisee requirements of keeping every aspect of the oral tradition surrounding the Law. Apostate Jews or excommunicated members of a synagogue would be considered "sinners," as well as those who sinned willfully and heinously and did not repent. The Pharisee's prayer at the Temple put tax collectors alongside robbers, evildoers, and adulterers (Luke 18:9-12). Tax collectors were willing to associate with people that respectable Jews would have nothing to do with.¹²⁶

Levi and Matthew (Luke 5:27)

The particular tax collector in our passage probably isn't the chief tax collector in his district, for he apparently spends his days in a tax office near the shore of the Sea of Galilee in Capernaum (see Mark 2:13-17), alongside the main road. The word translated "tax booth" (NIV), "tax office" (RSV), or "receipt of custom" (KJV) is Greek *teōnion*, "revenue or tax office."¹²⁷ Levi is waiting to collect a toll on any goods transported past him as they enter the region ruled by Herod Antipas.

The tax collector's name is given in Mark and Luke as Levi, making it likely that he is a descendent of the tribe of Levi, from whom the priests and Levites descended. Back in the days of telephone books, in New York City you could find thousands of families by the surname of "Levi" or "Levine." Instead of a holy ministry of serving in the temple, this Levi is instead engaged in a most unholy trade -- at least as it was practiced in Palestine. Mark 2:14 also identifies him as the son of Alphaeus.



Location of Capernaum ([larger map](#))

But the name he is best known by is "Matthew" (in Matthew, Mark, and Luke) in the list of the Twelve Disciples (Luke 6:14-16). Matthew's gospel in that list specifies him as "Matthew the tax collector," lest there be any confusion (Matthew 10:3). The authorship of the Gospel of Matthew is attributed to him by many scholars, both ancient and modern.¹²⁸ And it was not uncommon to have two names, or a name and a nickname. Peter is called Simon son of Jonah, Simon Peter, and Cephas (the Aramaic form of Peter). Saul and Paul both refer to the Apostle from Tarsus, Saul his Jewish name, and Paul (Paulus) the name he uses as a Roman citizen and traveler.

Leaving Everything and Following (Luke 5:27-28)

Jesus has been teaching again along the lakeshore at Capernaum (Mark 2:13). When he is finished, he walks over to the small tax office or customs house alongside the highway. Sitting inside is a despised man, Matthew Levi by name, whom Jesus has seen several times in the crowds as he has been teaching. Jesus looks at him, and says simply: "Follow me." The word in Greek is, *akolouthēō*, which means,

literally, "come after" from *a*, copulative, and *keleuthos*, "road," properly, "walking the same road."¹²⁹ Then it means "accompany, go along with." But it also has a specific meaning, "to follow someone as a disciple."¹³⁰ It goes along in the tradition of the rabbinical master-pupil relationship.¹³¹ Jesus' invitation is a two-word command: "Follow me."

Think what Levi feels like when he hears those two words tap-tapping like a door-knocker on his soul. He is being called to leave his lucrative trade as a tax collector to become almost a beggar, sustaining himself on the sometimes meager contributions made to his Rabbi or Master. In an instant, he is being called from wealth to poverty.

But I don't think the issue of poverty really enters into his decision. Only one thing matters, and it matters very deeply -- oh, so deeply -- to Levi. That Jesus has sought him out and selected him on purpose.

That Jesus would even engage him in conversation is a marvel. He is despised. He is hated. He has been ostracized from respectable society. And Jesus cares enough about him to stop by when not required by law to do so. Jesus accepts him. Jesus loves him -- the most unloved man in Capernaum. And Jesus calls him personally: "Follow me." Since he was a boy, he hadn't imagined himself a righteous man. Now he is being called to accompany a holy man on his itinerant travels. How bizarre! How wonderful!

I don't think that the money has any allure for him in the face of this simple request: "Follow me." That he is wanted, needed, by his Prophet, this Miracle Worker, this incredible Teacher. It is enough for him. Luke records,

"Levi got up, left everything, and followed him." (Luke 5:28)

Oh, I'm sure he turns in to the chief tax collector the money he had collected and submits his formal resignation -- he is responsible enough to do that, surely. But when he stands up, the decision has been made, the die is cast, and he leaves his tax collection trade never to turn back. Instead, he follows Jesus. The word "followed" is *akoloutheō*, but now it is in the Imperfect Tense, which suggests beginning an action and continuing it thereafter, such as "he began to follow."

Jesus Dines at Levi's Banquet (Luke 5:29)

He replies to Jesus' invitation by issuing his own invitation to his new Master. "Jesus, I would be very honored if you would be a guest in my home this very night." Jesus accepts.

And so Levi scurries off to make preparations for a great feast, Greek *dochē*, "reception, banquet."¹³² This is no intimate dinner party for a few guests. Luke describes it with the word *meγas*, "great." To his large house, suited to a wealthy man, Levi invites "a large crowd of tax collectors and others."

Now if you and I were there, we might have sat stiffly in the presence of these jovial social outcasts. We wouldn't be comfortable in the least! These are out and out thieves, unbelievers, open sinners, social

pariahs. No, we wouldn't be comfortable at all. We would wait until a reasonable hour, make our excuses, and leave with a sigh of relief.

But Jesus is comfortable. I can see him enjoying the occasion, getting acquainted with people who have been afraid to approach him before, now enchanted in his presence. He is eating heartily of Levi's sumptuous food, drinking of Levi's excellent wines, and thoroughly enjoying himself. His joy before them lights up this party of outcasts into an occasion that they will remember to their dying day. The afternoon when Jesus the Messiah ate dinner at the same table, shook their hand, put his arm on their shoulder, and embraced them in warmth and friendship. They will never forget, nor will Levi.

Levi has introduced his closest friends to his newest Friend, and is now ready to follow. The growing band of disciples -- Peter and Andrew, James and John -- who have despised him for collecting a toll on their fish exports, may have been stand-offish at first. But when they see Jesus warmly accept him, they accept him, too, into this strange new fellowship of disciples called from all walks of life to walk with Jesus and learn his ways. It is giddy and glorious, and deeply moving to Levi, as he cleans up after the party. He is no longer Levi the tax collector. He is Matthew the Disciple, and it feels very good. Very good indeed.

Pharisees and Scribes Put Jesus Down (Luke 5:30)

But Levi's joy is mixed. Because he is the occasion for drawing more criticism to Jesus from the Pharisees and their scribes -- the teachers of the law that hold to their particular interpretation of the oral law. It must hurt to hear his new fellow disciples put down with the question,

"Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" (Luke 5:30)

Doctor for the Sin Sick Soul (Luke 5:31-32)

Jesus, who is no doubt intended to hear this loudly-spoken put-down, chooses to respond, instead of to let it pass. He turns to the scribes and Pharisees with a comment of his own:

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (5:31-32).

No matter what might be recommended by the American Medical Association, many people never go to the doctor for an annual check-up. Instead, they go when they're sick, when they sense a problem, a growth, a weakness, an ache, an injury. There are few appointments made on a schedule -- with the exception of well-baby visits in the first few months of life. Appointments are made because the patients have something wrong.

And so Jesus answers the Pharisees' criticism, "Doctors aren't for the healthy, but for the sick." And then he continues, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." If all were righteous, spiritually healthy, Jesus would have no necessity to pay a house call. But because we are not so

righteous after all, because our souls are troubled and besmirched by compromise -- because of all this we desperately need Jesus to come and call us to something better than the filth we may be living in. We need him to call us to our best.

How long has it been since you've made an appointment to see Jesus? To talk to him about the things that are weighing you down? To risk him identifying the sins that you are all too aware of? Sometimes we resist going to the doctor because we're afraid he'll confirm what we already know. And so in our fear we try to avoid what we know is true. How about you? Isn't it about time to make an appointment with the Doctor?

I love the wonderful African-American slave song with this theme:

There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin sick soul.

Playlist:

"Follow Me", by Bryan Sirchio

I met this preacher from Australia
He read the Bible searching for its dominant themes
And he counted 87 times when Jesus said... "Follow me."
Well you know that got me thinking
Maybe that's the bottom line of what "Christian" means
'Cause "I follow Jesus" is deeper than "I believe"
'Cause it don't take much to mentally agree
With a set of beliefs written down in some creed
Now don't get me wrong,
we need to know what we believe
But lately I've been wondering...

(Chorus)

Am I following Jesus, or just believing in Christ
'Cause I can believe and not change a thing
But following will change my whole life
He never said, come, acknowledge my existence
Or believe in me I'm the 2nd person of the Trinity
But 87 time he said... Follow me

But if I'm a follower of Jesus,
Then why am I such a good life insurance risk?
And why, when I do my giving,
do I still keep so much when so much hunger exists?
And if I follow Jesus, then why do I have so many friends
among the affluent, and so few among the poor?
And if I follow Jesus,
why do missiles and guns make me feel more secure?
And it don't take much to mentally assent
To a statement of faith we can confirm and forget
But following will change our lifestyle if we get it and
more and more I'm wondering...

(Bridge)

Yes, we need to know what we believe,
to follow the Jesus who's real
God save us from the Christ's we create in our image
(you know what I mean...)
The Jesus who's as left wing or right wing as we
The one who baptizes our cherished ideologies
The one who always seems to favor our side
against some enemy

Now I don't mean to sound self-righteous
God knows I've got more questions than answers to proclaim
But its been over 20 years now since Jesus called my name
So forgive me if I'm mistaken
But there's something wrong with a lot of churches
in America these days
And I think the Spirit's trying to tell us
There's a question that the churches need to raise...

(Chorus)

Are we following Jesus? Or just believing in Christ?
'Cause we can believe, and not change a thing
But following will change our whole life
He never said, come, acknowledge my existence
Or believe in me, I'm your first class ticket to eternity...
But 87 times he said... Follow me...