

Living the Story of the Follower

Based on John 3:1-21, Mark 14:32-50, & Mark 15:33-16:8

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on Jan 18, 2026

As we continue to explore what it means to read the Bible as an ongoing, unfinished story that we are invited INTO, I want to make a very important distinction this morning. It is the distinction between those who are fans of Jesus...and those who are followers of Jesus. Fans and followers.

When we read the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we see that Jesus garnered a huge number of fans over the course of his 3-year public ministry. Think of all the scenes in which large crowds have gathered to listen to or witness what the Rabbi Jesus is saying or doing. There was a large crowd when Jesus delivered his sermon on the mount, which a group of us are studying every Wednesday in our Lunch and Learn series. There were the crowds gathered on that Galilean hillside when Jesus fed the 5000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish. To these people and many others, Jesus was a phenomenon, a curiosity, a fascinating person to keep an eye on from a distance.

Jesus even garnered such fascination and fandom from certain Pharisees, like Nicodemus. The third chapter of John, which has become one of the most well-known chapters in the entire New Testament, takes us inside a secret meeting between the Rabbi Jesus and one of his unlikely fans – Nicodemus. Nicodemus is fascinated by Jesus. He's heard the reports of Jesus's miracles, he's been in the meetings with the other religious leaders who see Jesus as a threat and a rabble-rouser. And yet, Nicodemus is curious enough about this non-traditional rabbi to risk his own reputation as a Pharisee by meeting with him secretly, under the cover of darkness, in attempt to learn more about this interesting Nazarene.

But what DIDN'T Nicodemus do...? Well, the same thing that the vast majority of those crowds didn't do; Nicodemus didn't *follow* Jesus. He was a fan; but he never became a follower. If you want to see this distinction between fan and follower dramatized in an incredibly sensitive and powerful way, watch or even re-watch Season 1 of *The Chosen*, and pay careful

attention to Nicodemus. You will see, in a very profound and memorable way, just how big the gap is between fans and followers where Jesus is concerned.

Even Jesus's own disciples at times slipped back into being fair-weather fans of their rabbi rather than truly following him. We spoke last Sunday of Peter's 3-fold denial of Jesus when the going got tough. In Mark 14, one of today's readings, we see the disciples failing to follow Jesus's simple instructions during his gut-wrenching prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. He asked them 3 times to stay awake with him while he prayed, but they didn't. And when the moment of Jesus' arrest finally came, Mark originally ended his gospel with that chilling line – "they all forsook him and fled...they all forsook him and fled." Even the disciples struggled to truly follow Jesus when the going got tough.

If we really want to see a positive example of what following Jesus looks like in the Bible, it's the women we need to pay attention to. That's what our last passage from Mark 15 reveals to us, as we consider the important distinction between fan and follower. While the men all forsook Jesus and fled, check out what the women did. Mark tells us that as Jesus was being crucified, "some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and Salome." Mark adds, "In Galilee these women had FOLLOWED Jesus and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him from Jerusalem were also there." These women did not flee when the going got tough. These women did not go back up to Galilee to resume their previous lives once Jesus was arrested and killed. In fact, after Joseph of Arimathea procured the body of Jesus for burial, the two Mary's and Salome came to the tomb to properly anoint Jesus in his tomb. The women, in other words, were followers. They went with Jesus and kept going with Jesus, even when it was dark, risky, and even depressing.

And so I don't suppose it was an accident or coincidental that when the risen Jesus came back from the dead, the first people he appeared to were the women. The angel at the tomb announced Jesus's rising to these most faithful followers. Jesus himself put these female followers in charge of telling

the disciples that Jesus was alive. It is these women who exemplify what it looks like to follow Jesus to and even through the cross.

Now, if you'll permit me a little sidebar, this is why it has never made sense to me that so many Christian churches have relegated women to second-class citizenship. It has never made sense to me that man Christian church won't allow women to be elders, won't allow women to preach, and won't allow women to be ordained. I'm sorry, but I think we've got that 100% backwards. One could argue from these very passages that women were the first people Jesus ordained to preach and to tell the world that Jesus had risen.

So, back to the point...the Bible is filled with a huge number of fans of Jesus and a much smaller number of followers of Jesus. And, today's world and today's church, I would argue, is filled with a huge number of fans of Jesus and a much smaller number of followers of Jesus. And to be fair, many of us who like to think of ourselves as followers can slip back into fandom from time to time, like the disciples did, right?

So, what about us...? Are we Jesus's fans...or Jesus's followers...? And how will we know...? How will the world know...? Well, I think the answers really lie in the very thing we've been talking about in this sermon series. The distinction between fan and follower may come down to whether we enter the story or not. If we are content to read and study the biblical story as a closed book, a finished story from the past, in hopes of getting a little insight for living, we're going to be fans. We'll be no different than those huge crowds on the Galilean hillsides, craning their necks in attempt to get a glimpse of Jesus.

But if we view the biblical story as on-going, unfinished, and still being written, we have a shot at becoming followers. If we interact with the stories – like the 3 we explored this morning – as portals, entry points for us to jump into the living, unfolding story, we are on our way to becoming followers. We've already seen – in the first 3 weeks of this series on jumping INTO the story of Jesus and his love – people in modern times, people in contemporary times living the story of Jesus. Whether it's Donn Start out in Arizona with his ministry to the homeless, or Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu living the

story of Justice as restoration through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Whether it's the story of our partnership with Healthy Communities in Guatemala or the work we're now doing right here to support inmates at the Charlevoix County jail, the possibilities for jumping into and LIVING the story of Jesus and his love are endless.

And please don't overlook or discount my little sidebar a few moments ago about women and their role in society and in the church as a crucial part of the story we ought to be jumping into. A huge number of very vocal Evangelical Christians are turning to a couple verses from the Apostle Paul and saying, "It is finished! It has been decided! Women are to be subservient to men, to know their place, and to keep quiet!" Not us! We are jumping into the story where women were and still are some of the most faithful followers of Jesus – to and through the cross! We are going to continue not only to tell the story, but to LIVE the story of women being the first people the risen Jesus appeared to and entrusted with the call to go AND tell the disciples that Christ is risen indeed!

Friends, Jesus doesn't need more fans. He doesn't need more interested bystanders to reflect and consider what his teachings might mean. He needs more followers, people who are committed to building the very kingdom Jesus himself sought to build. We know what the features and characteristics of that kingdom are – it's where justice is defined as restoration rather than retribution; it's where hungry are fed and thirsty people are given drink; it's where those who are sick and lonely are visited and cared for; it's where we visit those who are in prison and remember them as if we were in prison with them; it's where everyone has decent affordable shelter; the kingdom of God is where those of us who have far more than we need gladly share our excess with those who don't have near enough.

This is the story we're invited into. This is the story of Jesus and his love. And anybody who wants to be a follower, rather than just a fan, is invited to jump in to live the great and ongoing adventure of Jesus and his love. Amen.