September 11, 2011

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS

Years ago I was invited to play in a golf marathon. It was to benefit a home for women struggling with addictions. I had been sponsored by a member of my congregation to play in this golf marathon, so I kind of had to do it. Now when I accepted the invitation I imagined that it might be something like two rounds a golf in the same day – which is, in itself, twice as much golf as God intended anyone to play in one day. I later discovered that this was not the case. This was not a golf marathon … this was a golf iron-man, triathlon, marathon on steroids. The gist of the marathon was this: 36 holes of golf (as I said, twice as much as any human should play who has a life) – but the twist was --- you played 3 balls. So off the first tee you hit ball #1, ball #2 and ball #3. You try to remember where ball #1 and ball #2 and ball #3 went. You proceed to ball #1 and you hit your second shot with that ball. You find ball #2 and you hit your second shot with that ball. You find ball #3 and you hit your second shot with that ball. On and on it goes. 36 holes. If you are a scratch golfer (meaning you shoot level par) that means you complete the day having stroked a golf ball 432 times. 432 times! Now friends, I am not a scratch golfer!!! I finished the round – 13 hours later -- with a score of 627!
Now when I play golf I have trouble keeping track of one ball. You can imagine that I’m not often in the fairway. I’m in the woods, the fescue, the rough, the water. So I am spending a lot of time on my golf cart roaming around the course. My playing partner that day could hit the ball a country mile – the only problem was he didn’t know which country mile he was going to hit it. He was spraying balls all over the place. When we got to the sixth hole – with 31 holes still left to play he asked me if by chance I had some extra balls. I asked him if he had lost a couple. Yeah, he said, about 20.

It was the longest day of my life. It is hard enough to follow one ball, let alone three balls. It is hard enough to follow one path, let alone three paths … or four paths … or five paths.

When I was a boy my mother had a dream of me being a musician. Being the youngest of four boys – and the first three not having been given the musical gene – my mother was going make me into a musician whether I wanted to be or not. So I agreed to guitar lessons. And so I took weekly guitar lessons for three years. Classical guitar. My mom wanted me to learn how to play “Classical Gas” as good as Mason Williams. But it was around the same time that I developed an interest in basketball and found myself out with my friends all the time playing basketball. I had less and less time for guitar practice and it began to show up in my
lessons. My teacher grew more and more disappointed in my performance until the moment when she had me put my guitar down and she said, “You have to decide. There is something that is more important than this in your life. I don’t know what it is. But it is obvious that your love for the guitar is eclipsed by your love for something else. So you have to decide which path you are going to take. Because two paths don’t cut it.” So I went home and I told my mom – that the guitar was interfering with my path toward becoming a professional basketball player. It had come time to choose. Basketball was my destiny.

This will come to no surprise to you as you look at my 5’ 10” frame – that I made the wrong choice.

Two weeks ago we talked about the crossroads that lie before us every day. Every day presents to us a myriad of choices on ways to go. Decisions. Preferences. Priorities. And with those choices and decisions come often the consideration of who am I going to be. Every day we get to answer the question, “Who am I going to be?” Because the way life goes you and I get to wear a bunch of different hats. We take on different roles. Some of us wear the hat of parent. Some wear the hat of child. Some wear the hat of employee. Some wear the hat of employer. Some wear the hat of spouse. Some wear the hat of businessperson. Some wear the hat of neighbor. Some wear the hat of friend. And with these different hats comes the distinct
possibility, maybe even probability, that instead of being one person wearing different hats, we become different persons depending on the different hats we wear. The chance that I act differently depending on the role I am performing. That with each new day I have these paths before me … let’s call them paths of personhood … and instead of choosing one path and remaining one person, I choose many paths and become different people. Instead of hitting one ball I hit three balls, four balls, five balls all in the course of one day. That when I got into the office I am one person. When I meet my friends I am another person. When I come home I am another person. When I make my way to church I am another person.

It is always an interesting experience for me when I go to visit a person at their workplace and we get into a situation where I am introduced as this person’s pastor to a work colleague – it’s always interesting to see the reaction and the dynamics. For some the response is, “Oh, of course, Charlie talks all the time about his church and his small group and his Bible Study.” Or … the response can be stunned silence: “Oh … uh … gee … I would never have guessed that ol’ Charlie would have had a pastor. You must be some interesting pastor, buddy.” Charlie is either the same person under two hats. Or two persons under two hats … or three persons under three hats.
So we have these hats to wear, these balls to follow, these roles to choose from – and one of the great stresses in life is trying to head in different directions at the same time. Some of you reminded me of Yogi Berra’s famous line: When you get to a fork in the road, take it. Sometimes, maybe many times, we come to the crossroads … the fork in the road … and we take it. We take all the paths. We chase all the balls and life becomes the anxious back and forth.

Boris Pasternak, the author of Dr. Zhivago, said once, "The great majority of us are required to live a constant, systematic duplicity. Your health is bound to be affected by it if, day after day, you say the opposite of what you feel, if you grovel before what you dislike and rejoice at what brings you nothing but misfortune. Our nervous system isn’t just a fiction, it’s part of our physical body, and our soul exists in space and is inside us, like teeth in our mouth. It can’t be forever violated with impunity."

So maybe all this is what Jesus is trying to get at when he arrives onto the scene in the Galilean countryside and in his inaugural speech to those who are close enough to listen he begins with two words: Follow me. Lots of words Jesus could have started with – but the words he chose were: Follow me. Because you see when someone says to you, Follow me … and starts his way down the path … it means you get presented with this wonderful opportunity
of having only to choose one path. You can’t follow a person on two paths or three paths. You can only follow a person down one path. You can’t say, “Yes, I will follow you … but only if you don’t mind that I head down these other paths as well.” Jesus says, “Follow me … I’m heading down this path.” And with this invitation comes an incredible grace – grace that takes away from us the burden of having to be more than one person. Lots of hats, maybe … but one person. And this person we call … a follower of Jesus. I don’t have to be anything else but a follower of Jesus. I get to do what he wants me to do. I get to follow where he wants me to go. I get to listen as he gives me direction. But I no longer have to worry about the other paths. I don’t have to chase three, four or five golf balls.”

Think of it – if someone came to you and said that you have a choice on how to play golf – you can do it with one golf ball … follow only one golf ball … look for only one golf ball … find only one golf ball – OR – you can play with three golf balls – follow three golf balls … look for three golf balls … find three golf balls … account for three golf balls – which way would you choose to play? I know there are some obsessive golfers out there that would choose the three – but you already know you need help.

Follow me, Jesus says. There is no more concise way to sum it up – than when Jesus says to you and to me – Follow …. Me. That life is following, not leading – that I don’t have to
come up with the plan – someone has it already. Follow … me! Jesus identifies the leader.  
No other leaders. No other paths. Follow me.

It’s why he says in our lesson – that the door is narrow and the path is hard – because at 
the outset we don’t want to give up all the other ways. We have gotten so used to living the 
duplicious life. Of being more than one person with more than one hat – that when Jesus says, 
Follow me … he leads us into becoming an integrated person. Not a compartmentalized person 
… but an integrated person. So that wherever we go, no matter what hat we wear, we remain 
the same person – a follower of Jesus. We’re hitting the same ball down the same course.

That when I show up at work – I’m a follower of Jesus. When I show up at the golf 
course – I am a follower of Jesus. When I show up at the dinner table – I am a follower of 
Jesus. When I make my investments – I am a follower of Jesus. When I go to a party – I am a 
follower of Jesus. When I pass by a hungry person – I am a follower of Jesus. And all this 
freees me to be one person. God’s person. Jesus’ follower.

In Roy Blount’s wonderful little biography on Robert E. Lee – he shares about the time 
when the great general was out for a walk in the snow with his son Custis trailing behind. And
at one point Lee looked back at Custis and saw the young boy placing his feet in the foot tracks his father was leaving behind. Later Lee wrote to a friend: “It behooves me to walk very straight, when this fellow is already following in my tracks.”

That is, isn’t the challenge that you and I face – that with all the paths before us … and with all the temptations we face to be more than the one person we were created to be – with all he jutting back and forth between this path and that path – that chances are there is someone behind us following and asking, “Who are you? What person are you? What path have you chosen?” It is the greatest gift we give those who follow … to choose the one path we shall traverse.

Follow me, Jesus says. And with the invitation comes a remarkable grace. That we don’t have to be more than one person. We don’t have to bear the burden of traveling more than one path. Chasing more than one ball. We don’t have to risk leading those behind us down a confusing way. Just one set of tracks in the snow we must follow. All with the promise, the remarkable promise, that the way he walks … the path he takes … is the way that leads to life.