

The verbs of Lent's second Sunday

By [Larry Patten](#)

February 23, 2015

Jesus didn't speak the pleasant, sit-at-the-library-table verb *study* me.

Instead [Jesus said](#), "*follow* me."

It's easier to study Jesus. I relish settling into my cushy recliner, cracking open a friendly book or two, and gleaning details about the context of Jesus' era. How can we really understand any of those parables he told unless we understand the role of women in first-century Palestine, or the particular garments people wore, or grasp the pre-industrial techniques of farming, shepherding, carpentry, and so forth? I need to learn about Galilean geography during the Roman Empire so that I can (cleverly) determine when the Gospel of Luke is incorrect about a particular location. I wrestle with translating ancient Greek (should've taken more than one semester in seminary), but still like it when I find the nuanced meaning of a word in the Gospel of Mark to wow a congregation or shame an arrogant take-the-Bible-literally colleague.

Please, let me *study* Jesus. Give me a little time, the deadline of a sermon or class, and I'll gladly offer swell insights about long-dead languages, primitive cultures, and—bonus—the nagging flaws of, say, atonement theology.

Jesus, however, said the troubling verb *follow*.

Following is not hiding behind the neutral words that don't upset anyone or the clever words meant to intimidate everyone. Following is not debating Jesus' divinity or humanity, but plunging into life with your faith, your fears, your feet, your hands, your inevitable mistakes, your flawed love. Following is scrambling across the worst literal or figurative bridges in life, abandoning the safer side for no good reason other than faith. Following Jesus means looking foolish, having both cheeks slapped, handing your coat off to another, and even treating your worst enemy with respect. (In other words, *loving* your enemy . . . Jesus could be so exasperating!)

With gratitude for the recently deceased theologian [Marcus Borg](#), I'll share (and agree with) his views (from *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*):

The way of Jesus is thus not a set of beliefs about Jesus. That people ever thought it was is strange, when we think about it—as if one entered new life by believing certain things to be true, or as if the only people who can be saved are those who know the word “Jesus.” Thinking that way virtually amounts to salvation by syllables.

Rather, the way of Jesus is the way of death and resurrection—the path of transition and transformation from an old way of being to a new way of being. To use the language of incarnation that is so central to John, Jesus incarnates the way. Incarnation means embodiment. Jesus is what the way embodied in a human life looks like.

To follow Jesus is the daily challenge to be more fully human.

Over several days at my desk (doing the *study* thing!), I stared at the prior sentence and the blank, digital wilderness that loomed underneath. What could I write next? How can I authentically tell anyone that I follow Jesus, let alone *how* to follow Jesus’ way?

I know myself. I am selfish, lazy, biased, hypocritical, arrogant, indecisive, and sanctimonious. How can I follow if I’m so hollow? How dare I suggest to any other—indeed, to you reading this—that I know one thing about following Jesus?

And yet I believe one thing, especially with Lent’s journey orienting me toward Easter, toward incarnation, toward words becoming flesh, toward the risk of being more fully human. I believe there are myriad *ways* of following Jesus.

So, then, are all of those ways acceptable? Since I have learned much from other faith traditions, and also recognize the wide diversity of “tribes” within Christianity, I faithfully hesitate to rank or dismiss how others experience the Holy.

At many of the churches I served, I took groups on hikes. They included first-timers and trail veterans, middle-school students and seventy-something retirees. Though trekking along the same mountain path, each person had a distinctive pace. Some were slow, some fast. There were chatty ones and silent ones, photographers dawdling to “capture” wildflowers and those maintaining a steady rhythm. Regardless of hiking speed, I required everyone to wait at trail junctions. It provided time to check-in. It kept a group together. Occasionally my rule was ignored. Once, a

grandfather and his 10-year old grandson hiked with other church members. Maybe trying to impress his grandson with his physical prowess or just enjoying time with the kid, they strode past a spot where multiple trails crisscrossed a ridge. My wife, accompanying me on that trip, dropped her pack and raced to catch them before they became lost in the woods.

Whether innocently or intentionally, it is seductive to see the world only through *my* eyes. When we follow with others, we are in relationship with those others. For Christ's sake, becoming more fully human involves valuing every other human.

In this Sunday's Gospel verses, the disciple Peter sought to correct Jesus, to disagree with Jesus' path of suffering. Jesus accused Peter of thinking human thoughts rather than God's thoughts. Peter wanted Jesus to serve God by following a way Peter preferred; I think Peter wanted Jesus to be just like Peter.

Lent, always more personal than seasonal, invites me to follow Jesus' way, to discern where my particular path will strengthen my faith while respecting other paths.

*Originally posted at [Patten's blog](#)*