

**A Three-Eyed Faith
Matthew 11:28-30
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Two of my friends resigned their pastorates this month without having another job awaiting them. Both men are excellent ministers who have been serving congregations who, in all the important ways, strive to follow Jesus. Neither man has done anything wrong; neither church has been overly demanding or unsupportive. In fact, in both cases, the primary difficulty both men have faced in following through on their resignations has been saying good-bye to people they genuinely love and who genuinely love them.

So why did they resign? I don't know all the reasons, but I am well aware of one of the dynamics that has been working on them for some time. It's a dynamic that works on all pastors, yours included.

Will Campbell, a Baptist preacher from Tennessee, may have captured the essence of the problem when he stated in his book Brother to a Dragonfly that he had to quit the church in order to go into the ministry. Brother Will discovered what all professional pastors sooner or later must confront. We enter the calling to follow Jesus and end up taking care of a church.

They're not the same task. Churches have leaky basements, budgets, committees, programs and personalities. They have rooms to arrange, staffs to manage, air conditioners to repair, yards to mow, parking lots to resurface, nurseries to staff, newsletters to publish, supplies to order, agendas to develop and meetings to moderate.

Pastors have to oversee all of this and much more and as a result often find themselves struggling to find time to the deeds of Jesus, the deeds by the way, that we entered the ministry to perform.

But I have yet to get to the real heart of the matter. Even if laypeople in the church handled every administrative task without any input whatsoever from the pastor, we would still be tempted to despair. Our desperation comes from the discrepancy we see between our own middle-class pastorates and the earthly ministry of Jesus.

Jesus had no home, no money, no wife, no children, no possessions and no pension. He forgave everyone who injured him, confronted all power with calls of justice, loved the good, bad and ugly, spent virtually every waking hour taking care of someone else, fed the hungry, healed the sick, liberated the oppressed, gave to the poor, made the blind to see, turned the other cheek, raised the dead and yielded his body to be crucified on a cross for the sins of the world. These endeavors were not just something he did during his forty-hour work week, they occupied the totality of his time.

Christ lived with total devotion to God, absolute sacrifice for others, complete commitment to his mission and relentless opposition to the violence, materialism, racism, sexism and corruption of his culture. Then he said, "Come, follow me."

How am I suppose to do all that?

Shane Claiborne, in his book Irresistible Revolution, issues a call to believers to live out such radical

discipleship. He has no home, no income, no wife, no children. He spends his days distributing food and clothing to the poor, tutoring inner city youth, advocating for the homeless at city hall, praying with the seniors in his neighborhood, helping two disabled friends with their daily routines, hosting conversations between gang leaders in Philadelphia in attempts to bring about reconciliation and a reduction in violence, teaching the Bible to young adults and visiting Iraq in attempts to work with the church in that country to end the war. He lives on pennies a day which he earns with various odd jobs and from contributions given to him by those who support his work. Claiborne writes, that, for the most part, churches in the United States have lost direct contact with the work and mission of Christ and that the only hope for the church to recapture true discipleship is for Christians in every community to follow his example.

When I was twenty, I might have considered doing just what he says, but not at fifty-three, which leaves me with a somber sense of failure. The non-ministerial demands of this job take up a giant amount of my time and energy, but that is not the only reason I fail to live more like Jesus. I'm too settled in my middle-class lifestyle to pull up stakes and live the radical life of Christ. When ministers, like myself, face up to our inability, even unwillingness to fully emulate the life of Jesus, we feel like we out to quit and pursue another line of work.

Of course, that line of thinking might cause all but the most devout disciples to give up on the faith. Is there not some room in the community of faith for tenderfoot disciples?

Certainly, if we rely solely on passages like Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler and his admonition to several would-be disciples to leave home, occupation and family behind to do his will, we will end up throwing our hands in the air and saying with the disciples, "then who among us can be saved." There must be other texts that can keep us stumbling, bumbling disciples on the path.

Over a hundred years ago, no lesser mind than Albert Schweitzer wrote in his landmark book A Quest for the Historical Jesus that many of the demands Jesus made on his first century disciples were required due to the brevity of his life and his assumption that Kingdom of God would come in its fullness within the lifetime of his followers. The apostle Paul was certainly under the impression that Jesus would return in his lifetime. Therefore, early disciples were advised to leave their occupations, remain single if they were single, leave their families of origin behind and devote themselves entirely to the preaching of the gospel, the healing of the sick and the alleviating of human misery.

Two thousand years have passed since then though, and Christ has not yet brought time to a close. What it means to follow Jesus today must be somewhat different than it was at a time when believers thought they had, at most, a few years to serve until the end of the age.

We twenty-first century disciples might do better focusing on Matthew 11:28-30 to find guidance for our journeys. These few words from the Gospel of Matthew reassure us with a promise of grace. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus offered these words of grace to people who were feeling a huge sense of despair over the discrepancy between the way they lived and the way the Pharisees said they should live. The vast majority of those seeking Jesus' guidance felt there was simply no way they could earn a living, provide for their families and enjoy any earthly pleasures, while trying to keep all the laws taught by the religious establishment.

Sensing their desperation, Jesus said, "Brothers and sisters, you need a new teacher. Come to me, take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus is echoing a similar concept stated by the prophet Jeremiah in the sixth chapter and sixteenth verse of his prophecy. Jeremiah called on the people of his day to "Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies, and walk in it and find rest for your souls."

Rather than jump from where we are now to a way of life totally unlike any we have known, Jesus seems to be calling us to put on his yoke and learn how to walk the ancient paths, the good way, one step at a time.

If we had been in the audience the day these words were delivered, I'm sure we would have seen some faces brighten and some shoulders relax in relief. Listening to the whispers around us, I'm confident we would have heard people say, "You mean we can please the Lord without doing everything perfectly? God accepts our flawed approaches to the faith?"

I think we can respond similarly with, "You mean I can follow Jesus without quitting my job, selling my house and becoming an itinerant preacher?"

I don't want to water-down the faith here. I believe the call to follow Jesus is a radical calling that, over time, changes the way we relate to everything in life. The burden of changing everything overnight, however, is too heavy for most of us to even contemplate. Our Lord seemed to understand that and therefore called us to come to him, take on his yoke and allow him to guide us step by step to make each alteration in our values, behavior and attitudes until, by his grace, we become like Him.

Taking on a yoke is a foreign concept to most of us. In the coming weeks, I am going to try and clarify what it means for twenty-first century disciples to wear the yoke of Christ. I think it means to live by a three-eyed faith. In other words, we walk the ancient paths, the good way by following a three-eyed faith. The three I's that make up this faith are information, inspiration and implementation.

To walk in the yoke of Christ, we need to gather information on the way Christ would have us to live. What did Jesus teach, for instance, on how to manage anger, respond to the poor, pray for the sick, treat people of races other than our own, respect women, cherish children, and face our own deaths. There is information to gather from the Scriptures on these and numerous other subjects. We must study the teachings.

Information alone, however, will not enable us to walk in the ways of Christ. We need inspiration to actually do what Jesus has taught us to do. Worship, communion, prayer, meditation, the example of others, the filling of the Holy Spirit, the music of the church, the poetry of the saints can all provide us with the inspiration needed for the mission Christ has given us.

Of course one can be informed and inspired and still not live out the ways of Jesus. One of the justifiable criticisms of the church is that we meet, sing, pray, worship, follow the liturgy, profess our faith and then go out into the world and live no differently than anyone else. Implementation of the ways of Jesus should naturally follow information and inspiration. For that, however, we need the encouragement, prayers, support and opportunity provided by our church. We need our brothers and sisters to say, "come with us and feed the hungry at the Community Café." "Come with us and march to the halls of power to demand help for the 168,000 children in poverty through our Penny Project." "Come with us and pray for the sick and homebound through our diaconate ministry." "Come with us and help us tell the children of this neighborhood about the love of Christ through Vacation Bible School and our Buck Lodge ministry." "Come with us and help us distribute the food through our food pantry." "Come with us and let us go to another community in need and share what we have through our PASSPORT mission trip." "Come with us and help us share our faith with the students at the university."

Tomorrow night, you are invited to gather in the prayer meeting room to work with others in deciding what

outreach ministries our church should undertake this year. It will be a chance to implement some of the teachings you have already been informed of and inspired to put into practice.

Through the coming weeks, each worship service will contain help in this three-eyed faith. Each service will offer some information on the ways of Jesus. Through communion, songs of praise, prayer and testimony, inspiration will also be available to follow through on the information received. And finally, opportunities to implement what we have learned and been inspired to do will be highlighted.

Hopefully, as we take Christ's yoke upon us and each bear our share of the burden, we will find ourselves taking steps toward becoming more like Christ. And steps can lead to life changing action.

Like the steps taken by Etta May Budd back at the turn of the century. Etta was an art teacher at Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa. She had a student who loved to paint pictures of plants. Etta took an interest in this student and discovered that in addition to his artistic talent, he had developed astounding abilities at gardening.

Etta's discipleship to Christ prompted her to reach out to the young student and help him find an outlet for his agricultural aptitude. She wrote her father, a professor at Iowa State and pestered him until he admitted the young African American gardener named George Washington Carver.

After Carver had been at school for only a few weeks, Etta visited him to see how he was adjusting to life in the big city of Ames, Iowa. She found Carver almost ready to quit because of the treatment he received by the students and faculty of the university. He was forced to eat in the kitchen of the dining hall and refused study privileges in the campus library. Again, Etta felt the yoke of Christ pulling her to respond and through her constant calls for justice, changed both policies so that Carver could receive treatment equal to the white students.

Her example inspired George Washington Carver to look for people he could help when he became a professor at Iowa State. Carver found that person in the form of a six year old boy by the name of Henry Wallace. Routinely, Carver took Wallace on walks through the fields and greenhouses of Iowa State and taught him all about the crops and experiments.

These daily walks inspired a lifelong interest in agriculture in Henry Wallace who grew up to procure funding from the Rockefeller foundation for experimental stations in Mexico to seek ways to increase the yield of crops in that country. One of the first scientist hired to work in that station was Norman Borlaug. Borlaug, who died recently, found ways to improve crop yields all over the world. He is credited with ending famines in many nations and saving the lives of over a billion people.

If Etta Budd would have thought the only way to follow Jesus was to leave everything she had and everyone she knew to hand out food to the poor, she might have fed a few hundred people in her lifetime. Instead, she heard God's call to take on the yoke of Christ and take a step of discipleship by helping a student pursue an academic career. The outcome was a billion saved lives.

Let's gather the information, put ourselves in the place of inspiration and work together on the implementation of the ways of God. Let's take a step and see what miracles God can do with our lives.