

Stepping Up: WWJD IHWM?

-This last week I listened to a segment of National Public Radio called My Unsung Hero. This is a program that tells the stories of persons whose compassion has made a meaningful impression on someone. Persons whose generosity at the time may not have been acknowledged, but who stepped up in some way to offer light and help and the solace of human kindness.

Patrick Furlong tells the story of how when he was a 13-year-old boy, his parents were divorced, and his father moved out of state. So after a painful year, when he was now a freshman, there was an event at his high school for which he needed to wear a tie. And after standing in front of the mirror making futile attempts, he realized through tears not only that he didn't have a clue how to tie a tie, but that there was no one at home who could show him. So he shoved the tie in his pocket.

But 'as I was waiting to get into the event,' says Patrick, '... a guidance counselor saw me, and he asked, you know, if I could come help him with something. And when we got out of earshot, he just asked me if I had my tie. And I'll never forget the loving, gentle smile he gave me as he tied it for me. And I think all he told me was, like, we're going to be OK. And we were.'

Years later when Patrick's son is preparing for his first communion, he himself gets called to the mirror to help tie a tie. And he realizes, he says, 'how powerful it is that I was so alone in that moment, that I didn't have a father to help me tie the tie and that all these years later, I'm getting to do that simple act for my child.'

Later that evening, Patrick finds himself experiencing a reflection that feels more like a vision and prayer. It's like he

'was back ... with my son earlier in the day, and I'm standing in that same position, lovingly putting his tie on. And I could picture that, like, Mr. Archibeque was standing behind me.... And that he had, like, his hand on my shoulder. And I'm just looking into my kid's eyes, and then I'm glancing into Mr. Archibeque's eyes, who are just smiling at me in that same loving way and telling me, we're going to be all right....

[It] was just this really pivotal moment in my life, and I realized that I don't know that I ever got to thank him for that. So if you're out there, Mr. Archibeque, thank you. You have no idea what it meant.//

Does anyone ever feel so alone as when they're 14 years old? I love this simple story for the way a school counselor quietly steps up with humble sensitivity to do something that brings dignity and self-respect and hope. And I love it for how a boy grows up to be a father who feels the weight of an encouraging hand on his shoulder and sees the light of loving eyes guiding him to do the same. Do you see the upward spiral of Christ-like love begetting the security and confidence do as Christ does? /

-You remember how Jesus invites disciples to fish for people? John Comer teaches us that that was not merely some cheeseball preacher analogy. Rather to be a 'fisher of men' was a weighty honorific. It was something that was said of a great rabbi. Someone who could capture the hearts and minds of people. In calling disciples to become fishers of people, Jesus was saying he would be their rabbi (and ours!), that he would apprentice them (and us!) to do what he was doing, to live as he was living. So that they and we might multiply his life-giving presence. So that they and we might capture hearts and minds by our winsome Way of life. First Mr. Archibeque. Then Patrick Furlong. Then his son. And so on...

-We who belong to Jesus Christ are the body of Christ, his eyes to see hurt faces, his fingers to help tie together hope in this adolescent world. We are his body. And we embody his presence. This is the calling of apprentices to Jesus. To be with him. To become like him. And if we've been with him, if we've become like him, to take risky steps to embody his love. To Do as He Does. Imperfectly, of course. But courageously.

And this will be the subject of our sermon series this fall. Having spent our summer thinking more about what it means to be with Jesus and become like him, this is the calling we begin to consider today: to Do as Jesus Does.

-This is from the gospel of John 14 (12, 15-17):

12 Very truly, I tell you, (says Jesus) the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do...

and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

15 "If you love me, you will keep[b] my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, (Helper, Comforter) to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be[d] in[e] you.

Here Jesus spells it out. Our vocation is to do what Jesus does. And even more (!) because the Spirit of Christ, Advocate, Helper and Comforter is not only with us, but alive within us.

And then there's this from the first chapter of Acts. You may recall that the Book of Acts is the second volume and continuation of the Gospel of Luke. Here's what Luke writes in Acts chapter one: 'In my former book I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach.' Began! I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach. As a limited human being, Jesus began the mission of God's love come close in person. But now that work continues through his apprentices. That is the book of Acts. Everything Jesus does in Luke, his apprentices do in Acts. And what's after Acts? Us.

-Do you remember those bracelets that came out in the 1990s that everyone was wearing? WWJD? Yes? What does WWJD stand for? 'What would Jesus do?' By the way, shout out. The bracelet idea came from a thoughtful youth pastor. The idea was for students of Jesus to pay attention, to practice a spiritual life, to pay attention to their thoughts, words and deeds in non-religious spaces, choosing to apprentice themselves to Jesus. To do as he would do.

We've said the life of an apprentice to Christ is not much about who we are on a Sunday morning. It's about who we are becoming in all other realms. In not-necessarily-religious spaces. Tell me. What are some of those realms? [Work- say, being a high school guidance counselor, friendship, civic engagement, recreation, driving, online, entertainment, communicating, relationships, physical health, purchasing, learning, serving, ordering at a restaurant, making decisions about end of life, figuring out alcohol, caring for your body, deciding where to volunteer, handling conflict, saving and spending money, ...] So many arenas for apprenticeship.

WWJD is a pretty good question. What would Jesus do? But Comer tells us there's a better one. Dallas Willard's defines a disciple this way: 'someone whose ultimate goal is to live their life the way Jesus would live if he were me.' So better than WWJD is WWJDIHWM. That is, What would Jesus do if he were me? Let me quote Comer (Practicing the Way):

Why is that better? Because the odds are that you're not a first-century, celibate Jewish rabbi; you're a twenty-first-century mom, freshman at uni, VP of a startup, freelance graphic designer, or my secret dream – a luchador (a masked Mexican acrobatic wrestler!)

It's a bit hard to ask WWJD if your current work is raising a two-year-old or teaching kindergarten or writing software or designing the HVAC system for a new building downtown – much less doing any of the latter while raising your two-year-old. Instead, ask this: How would Jesus live if he had my gender, place, personality profile, age, life stage, job, resources, and address? How would he show up to the world/ How would he handle _____?

For the apprentice of Jesus, that is the question all of life becomes an attempt to answer. /

-So this fall we will be considering passages where Jesus resists temptation, where he practices solitude and prayer, where he touches the untouchable and sets a scandalously hospitable table. We'll look at passages where he invites faith, loves enemies and seeks justice. We'll watch closely as he forgives without limits and mentors apprentices and lives a beautiful life whose cross is overcome by an empty grave.

But the questions we'll be asking as we learn his heart are more like What would Jesus have me be doing as a 21st century grandmother or middle-school bookworm? What would Jesus have me be doing as a present-day physical therapist or artist, as a runner or daughter of aging parents? What would Jesus have me be doing as a soccer coach, educator or business owner; as a white man or a woman of color? What would Jesus have me be doing in this world of relative wealth and health and unrestrained appetites? In a world of brilliant new technologies and school violence? In a world of 24-hour news, global mobility and growing loneliness; in a world of sacrificial virtue, housing crisis, and a multiplicity of Christian faith traditions? What would Jesus do if he were me – at my age, in my station of life, in my body, today? /

Tracey helped our older son move into student apartments last weekend for his sophomore year at college. Somewhere between moving boxes from the storage unit and making runs to Costco and Target, and the student registration desk, he looked over at Tracey and said, 'You know this adult stuff is hard.'

And it's true, isn't it? Growing up is hard. This change from considering ourselves 'Christians' to considering ourselves 'apprentices of Jesus' is no walk in the park. It's a high calling, maturity.

And our culture is So adolescent. (Just try to get us to RSVP.) It's much easier to be a kid who's not really expected to own responsibility. It's hard to step up. It's hard to make commitments. Hard to set boundaries. To put in the time. To restrain our appetites. To steward our dollars. To keep our mouth shut when the referee makes the wrong call. To admit our weakness. To be a role model. To ask for forgiveness. To share. To not get the credit. To build others up. To be the adult in the room looking out for the kid who needs a kind word and a tie tied.

What would Jesus do if he were me?

Phew! That might sound exhausting. As if the burden of the world were falling on our shoulders. As if we carrying on the legacy of a long-gone hero. As if Jesus' Way were to engage the world with worldly values and weapons.

But no. The burden of the world has already fallen on quite other shoulders. Our Rabbi and Lord has been raised from the dead to lead us to become our truest selves. And his Way of love is a far quieter, humbler, more peaceful and wholeness-giving way than the world's chaos.

In fact we have been called not to do what Jesus would do if he were here. But to do as Jesus is doing because he is here. In fact to do even more. Because he has not left us on our own. He has given his body the church the gift of the Spirit of God. It is not by our power that we can do as Jesus would do. It is by His power that he does his work of love through us who are his body.

Seeking us out in our adolescence. To love us. To lay his hand on our shoulder. To smile into our eyes. To be the One to say 'we're going to be ok.' And to call us to maturity even as Mr. Archibeque's gesture did for Patrick Furlong.

'Come to me you who are burdened by worldly worries,' says Jesus, 'and I will give you rest. Apprentice yourselves to my Way, and learn from me. For my gentleness and humility of heart are your soul's rest. My Way is easier. Doing as I do brings the peace that is lightness of heart.'

Friends, the invitation is in fact to step up to be Jesus. And there's no way to say that is a small thing. But the motivation is joy!

There's a line in Psalm 103 that says God 'satisfies us with good all the days of our life so that our youth is renewed like the eagle's.' I think that promise is at the heart of our calling. To be satisfied with good. Jesus says it this way: 'I have come that you might have Life, and have it abundantly, heaped up and spilling over.' To apprentice ourselves to Jesus, to become fishers of people, to watch for the kid whose whole life we might make with a reassuring look and a moment to tie a tie, to embody Christ's love, that's a calling that is buoyant with goodness and abundance and joy!

Today we come to the Lord's Table to be nourished.

The Lord offers us his body, his very self, to feed our faith, hope and love.

And we his apprentices then offer our own body, his body, to feed others.

Today as those called to do as Jesus does if he were me, I invite you to focus on two things:

What he does in generosity: This is my body given for you

And your calling to step up to be him, saying: This is my body given for you

And so the Table becomes a place of meeting with the Lord who has changed your life so that you might be empowered to change lives.

Let's pray...

How grateful we are to meet with you here at this table where you serve as a gracious host. Would you look lovingly into our eyes? Would you lay your hand on our shoulders? Would you speak those sacrificial words to each and all of us: This is my body given for you?

And Lord having watched and heard and tasted of your love, we pray that you might empower us by your Spirit within to contemplate what it means to do as you do. To be your body. To say as a matter of affirming our calling, to say looking out on the world you so love: This is my body given for you.

We do long to embody your love, Lord, and so we pray

for a world put right
for a nation healed and set on a pathway toward virtue and mutual respect
for a church grounded in your truth and grace
for a community that comes alive with your hope
for the persons on our hearts who are desperate, unwell, lost or in harm's way – for your solace and healing, redemption, and courage
for those we love, Lord, and for our neighbors, even for those we count our enemies – we ask your light and life and human kindness

Show us the way to embody the hope we pray, for we pray to be the joy of Jesus to a world that might know celebration and laughter and the wine of delight...Amen.

The Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed to death by someone at the table, took bread. And when he had given thanks, he broke it, saying what, church:

This is my body given for you. // Do this in remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup. And he said this cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink of it, do this in remembrance of me.

Paul says that when we eat this bread and drink this cup we do proclaim the saving death of the risen Lord until he comes.

This is not a Presbyterian table. This is the Lord's Table. The Table where he gives his body to the world. The table where he commissions us to give our bodies to the world. The Body of Christ for the world.

Servers, please come forward. There are both bread and gluten free wafers so that all may be served. If you wish to be served in your seat, please just indicate by raising your hand.

Because these are the gifts of God for all.