

Brand Loyalty
Matthew 16:13-20
September 7, 2008

Robyn Okrant of Chicago has an experiment for the year 2008: “to live life according to the wellspring of advice that Ms. [Oprah] Winfrey offers on her show, her Web site, and in *O: The Oprah Magazine*.” She wonders if she will find bliss if she wholeheartedly adheres to Oprah’s lifestyle suggestions. She follows the commandments of Ms. Winfrey with an exacting attention. If Oprah tells viewers to see a movie, she sees it. If Oprah simply tells viewers that a new CD is in the stores today, she doesn’t buy it. “She devotes about 40 hours a week to following Ms. Winfrey’s commands, but that doesn’t include the advice she has absorbed about her most basic functions.” While shopping for clothes, she found herself excited to fulfill some of the rules. She said, “It takes a huge amount of pressure off to be handed a spiritual path.” Ms. Okrant embarked upon this project because she wanted to learn why many women allow Oprah’s words to carry such weight in their lives, even when they are contradictory at times.ⁱ

This experiment prompts us to reflect upon the people, things, and forces that we allow to influence and shape our lives. Who do we follow? Marketers are constantly seeking our loyal adherence to their product in order to maintain or improve their standing among the competition. Brand loyalty is the consumer’s conscious or unconscious decision, expressed through intention or behavior, to repurchase a brand continually.

Brand Keys does a bi-annual Customer Loyalty Survey to determine which brands engender the greatest loyalty among consumers.

What do you think is the automobile brand with the highest loyalty among customers?

Toyota

The coffee brand engendering the greatest loyalty – Dunkin’ Donuts

The computer brand with the most loyal customers – Apple

The laundry detergent – Tide

The soft drink – Pepsi

The toothpaste – Crestⁱⁱ

We humans tend to be creatures of habit. Habits are safe and familiar. We don’t like change. In order to create brand loyalty, advertisers must break consumer habits, help them acquire new habits, and reinforce those habits by reminding us of the value of their product and motivating us to purchase it in the future. Marketers create an image around a brand that distinguishes it in a memorable and positive manner.

Brand loyalists have a mindset which says: “I am committed to this brand.” “I am willing to pay a higher price for this brand over other brands.” “I will recommend this brand to others.”

Brand loyalists who follow Oprah would say: “I am committed to Oprah and her advice.” “I will buy whatever Oprah buys.” “I will do whatever Oprah recommends.”

This morning we have heard Jesus conducting a public opinion poll among his disciples. Who in the world do people out there think I am? It is easy to report what they are hearing on the grapevine about Jesus. But then he personalizes the question. “Who do you say that I am?” What role do I play in your life? What standing do I have in the forces that influence you? How important am I to you?

The setting of this story is important. It takes place in the district of Caesarea Philippi, about 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Centuries before the Canaanites had worshiped Baal here. The Greeks had built a shrine here to the god Pan. The Romans built a temple in honor of the emperor. The city was rebuilt by one of Herod's sons, Philip, who renamed it Caesarea Philippi in honor of both the emperor and himself. There were many voices of the pagan past haunting this site, many gods vying for attention. Here in the midst of so many other cultural and religious influences, Jesus poses the question: Who do you say that I am? Where do I fit amidst all the forces seeking your loyalty?

Simon is the bold one who affirms, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." The Messiah, or *Christos* in Greek, is "the anointed one," the long-awaited king who is expected to save his people from oppression. Jesus is the Son of the "living God," in contrast with the gods of former and other nations, such as Pan and Baal, which are mere idols. In the face of all these other potential influences, Simon proclaims Jesus as the true revelation of the nature of God. He gives his heart to Jesus. He pledges his loyalty to Jesus.

Jesus affirms Simon's recognition of Jesus' role and nature. He gives Simon a new name, Peter. In essence, Jesus gives Simon a new identity, for in the Hebrew culture names are symbolic of a person's fundamental nature. The name Peter means "rock" or "foundation." It was not commonly used as a first name before Jesus gives it to Simon. Jesus is saying to Peter, "You and your confession of me as Messiah are the foundation upon which I will build my church. Around your loyal witness to me, I will assemble the people of God. The gates of hell will collapse when you challenge the power of death and destruction. With the keys to the kingdom of heaven, you can unbind people from the chains that oppress them. You will free and deliver people into new life. That's what you will do, because that's what I do. That's your new nature, because that is my nature. People will assemble around your leadership because you build your life around my life, just as I build my life around the nature of God."

Peter pledges his life to following Jesus because he sees God revealed in Jesus' life, ministry, and teachings. We are also those who have come to know God through Jesus. In response we pledge our loyalty to the way of life taught and modeled by Jesus.

The way of Christ is not always easy to follow. Even brave Peter found it difficult. In the heat of the moment when Jesus was on trial, Peter would not even acknowledge that he knew Jesus. He denied him. It is easy for us to deny Jesus. As in Peter's day, there are a multitude of influences vying for our attention. Many of those influences would draw us further away from a Christ-like life. We need to be vigilant and disciplined, making a conscious choice about our loyalty to Christ in the face of competing interests.

The gathering of disciples of Jesus as the church supports us in the ongoing challenges of staying focused on loving God and neighbor. We need one another and we need to gather in worship, prayer, study, and fellowship in order to ground ourselves in the life we are called to live. It is not a popular thing to go to church or to claim the name of Christ in our current cultural context. We often feel like oddballs when we tell others about our church activities. And yet this is where we need to be in order to stay loyal to the "Son of the living God."

In a world of self-interest, we can easily lose sight of the generous nature of God and the generosity to which Christ calls us. In a world of retaliation, we forget the language of forgiveness and seek revenge. In a world of harsh judgment, we are easily drawn into critique and away from compassion. In a world of malicious gossip, we are sucked into hurtful words, failing to offer godly encouragement to one another.

The Jesus movement in his time and the message of Jesus today are countercultural. Notice that I didn't say that the church is countercultural, nor did I say that Christians are countercultural. Some are, but as Peter Gomes, the chaplain at Harvard Memorial Church writes in his newest book, "most people read the Bible as confirmation of their own practices and convictions; they do not find themselves either condemned by it or challenged to change their views in light of what it has to say...The Bible and the church more often than not are used to preserve the status quo rather than to challenge or change it."ⁱⁱⁱ

One example of this is the prosperity gospel. It uses Jesus' promise of an abundant life, interpreting that to mean that God wants us to be prosperous. The implication is that wealth leads to happiness. If you are faithful to God, God will bless you with abundance. This is a distortion of Jesus' teaching. When he spoke of the abundant life, he wasn't speaking of monetary abundance. He referred to the abundance of blessings that make life meaningful, including loving relationships, faith in God, opportunities to serve one's neighbor. Jesus and the prophets warn us against gaining wealth at the expense of the welfare of others. The widow and orphan who have no provider are to be embraced by the community of faith. It is difficult to hold fast to the biblical message when the culture seduces us with materialism and entertainment.

Mark Twain is said to have remarked, "It is not what I don't understand in the Bible that troubles me; it is what is perfectly clear that does."^{iv} A popular question in recent years has been "What Would Jesus Do?" Peter Gomes suggests that this is "a problematic question because it implies that it is Jesus' role to enter into our world and become the solution to our problems, when we are meant to live as bravely and as fully in our world and time as Jesus lived in his." The more appropriate question is, "What would Jesus have me do?"^v

We need to pay attention to the script we are following. It is so easy to fall away from the teachings of Jesus and assume that the script of the popular culture is acceptable to Christ. After all the status quo is comfortable; the biblical teachings are challenging.

We gather together because we have made a conscious decision to allow the teachings of Jesus and the love of God to be the primary influences in our lives. We have stated our brand loyalty to Jesus the Christ. Just as Robyn Okrant of Chicago is adhering to the lifestyle recommended by Oprah, we have been called and chosen to live according to the teachings of Jesus Christ. When faced with choices in this vast marketplace of cultural influences, we, like Simon Peter, pledge our loyalty to the way of Jesus. This path often runs in opposition to standard behavior acceptable to society. We need the support of one another to hold fast to the faith and follow the way of righteous living. That's the rock, the foundation provided by the assembled people of God called the church.

"Ernest Gordon was a Scottish Presbyterian who suffered horribly at the hands of the Japanese as a prisoner of war during World War II. He survived unspeakable treatment in a prison camp, and at the end of the war came to be the distinguished and beloved chaplain of Princeton University. Dean Gordon became known as the man who could not hate the Japanese, who both in prison and at Princeton practiced and preached the gospel of reconciliation. Why? Because as a follower of Jesus he knew that love was stronger than hate and death. Generations sat at his feet and wondered how he could have survived the tortures of his imprisonment and emerged with his faith intact. He argued, in essence, that what had kept him going was not the knowledge that God loved him but the fact that he loved God, and that because of that he could not hate. This did not mean that he was heroic or a martyr in the early Christian sense: it meant that he was trying to do what Jesus would have him do."^{vi}

May that be our mission in life as well.

ⁱ Jessica Grose, “Life in the Time of Oprah,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2008.

ⁱⁱ www.brandkeys.com, retrieved September 5, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter J. Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What’s So Good About the Good News?* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), pp. 46-47.

^{iv} *Ibid*, p. 73.

^v *Ibid*, p. 78.

^{vi} *Ibid*, p. 83.

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