

A Moment and A Lifetimeⁱ
Psalm 62:5-12; Mark 1:14-20
January 25, 2009

One of the recent books on the bestseller list is called *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*. A.J. Jacobs' mission was to try to obey the entire Bible for a year. He wasn't a religious man. Jewish by heritage, the closest his family came to observing Judaism was placing a Star of David on top of their Christmas tree! He wanted to explore religion and see if there was any meaning to be found in the spiritual life that fascinated so many. He made a list of every rule, guideline, suggestion, and nugget of advice found in the Bible - a seventy-two page list! He soon realized that all aspects of his life would be affected, including the way he talked, walked, ate, bathed, dressed, and hugged his wife. Some rules would be good for him: No lying. No coveting. No stealing. Love your neighbor. Honor your parents. He said, "I'll be the Gandhi of the Upper West Side [of New York]." Other rules were strange and obsessive: Don't eat fruit from a tree planted less than five years ago. Pay the wages of a worker every day. Other rules were federally outlawed, such as: Destroy idols. Kill magicians. Sacrifice oxen.ⁱⁱ

On day one he went to the copy store to copy the Ten Commandments to post around his apartment as a memory aid. A woman sprinted to the counter to beat him in line. She asked the clerk to copy a stack of pages that looked like the collected works of J.K. Rowling. Fuming with frustration A.J. remembered the Proverb, "Those with good sense are slow to anger" (19:11). That became his mantra as he waited in line, "slow to anger, slow to anger." He finally made it to the counter and gave the cashier a dollar. She scooped his thirty-eight cents of change from the register and held it out for him to take. "Could you, uh, put the change on the counter?" he asked. He wasn't supposed to touch women so he was simply trying to avoid unnecessary finger-to-finger contact. "I have a cold," he said. "I don't want to give it to you." A complete lie. In trying to avoid one sin, he committed another.ⁱⁱⁱ

The book is a humorous and informative journey of living biblically, of what it would mean not only to take the Bible literally, but also to allow it to transform one's life. A.J. Jacobs made an intentional decision to follow this way of life for a year.

One day Jesus was walking by the seashore of Lake Galilee. He invited four fishermen to make a decision to follow him and learn his way of life. In this way Jesus was unique among religious leaders of his day. Most rabbis passively waited for students to come to them, but Jesus actively sought out his students. These four men made a momentary decision to follow Jesus, but the commitment to the way

of life he taught was for a lifetime. As disciples of Jesus Peter, Andrew, James, and John became lifelong learners of the teachings and ways of Jesus. The word disciple means “learning follower.” It was a radical decision. In leaving behind their fishing nets, they left not only their livelihood but also their families and a familiar style of living. They opted for an uncertain lifestyle of following a radical itinerant teacher.

Disciples are apprentices, binding themselves to a skilled master in order to learn an art or trade. Christian disciples are apprentices of Jesus, attaching themselves to Jesus in order to learn both enlightening wisdom and ways of implementing that wisdom in practical daily action. In professional trades, apprenticeships usually last a specific period of time, months or years. Discipleship entails a lifetime of apprenticeship, for each new situation and the stages of life present us fresh opportunities to learn and grow in faith.

Yesterday I learned of a surprising relationship formed between a mentor and apprentice. Many of you are familiar with Greg Mortenson, author of the book *Three Cups of Tea*. His Central Asia Institute has built 78 schools in remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. He has criticized U.S. military efforts in Afghanistan, saying that the cost of a Tomahawk cruise missile (\$840,000) would be better spent building dozens of schools instead. After General David Petraeus read *Three Cups of Tea*, Mortenson’s advice has been sought by the military on how to work with village elders and leaders. “There is a positive learning curve in the military,” says Mortenson.^{iv}

Disciples who make a lifetime commitment to following Jesus will always be on a positive learning curve. They continue to be enlightened by his teachings and receive them as challenges to grow. It is not simply a matter of posting the Ten Commandments or living good public lives. Discipleship is a matter of getting into the messy stuff of our lives and digging deep into our own inner lives to evaluate our actions, to learn from our mistakes, to work through dark and harsh emotions. It is a matter of diligent attention to our relationships so that we learn how to cooperate, forgive, trust and love one another. It involves “wrestling prayerfully with the rough places in our souls that resist Jesus’ saving invitations.”

Spiritual director Robert Morris suggests that “each of [Jesus’] challenges invites us into creative conflict with ourselves, stirring the latent capacities of our souls into bud, blossom, and growing fruit.

“Being an apprentice means starting, honestly and humbly, where we are rather than where we should be. We are, in fact, unskilled. The good Master will present us with tasks that are just beyond our reach, tasks that build on our strengths and challenge our weaknesses, and he will stand by us in our clumsiness as we learn. Our ignorance and mistakes put us into a searching, inquiring mode:

How can we do this well? Are there others who could give us tips? Have we understood the instructions?

“The goal of the apprentice is to become proficient, not perfect; skilled in grace, not beyond improvement.” The final goal is a teaching of Jesus, which Morris paraphrases like this: “Become proficient and wholehearted in your compassion as your Lifesource is compassionate” (Matthew 5:48).^v The life goal of a disciple of Jesus is to become proficient in compassion.

One way to cultivate a lifetime of discipleship is to read through Jesus’ teachings. The Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew’s Gospel, chapters five through seven, is a good place to start. Make a list of the challenges of Jesus that hit home for you. They have to do with anger, resolving conflict, forgiveness, retaliation, loving your enemies, acts of charity and justice, prayer and money.

The next step is to list things you already do (actions and attitudes) that embody each teaching. Recognize and affirm those ways in which you are already fulfilling these teachings.

Then list those teachings which you are not practicing. Which specific teachings need more attention in your life? Don’t get stuck in guilt; just note those areas for growth.

Select one as your “growing edge” and consider two or three ways this practice might improve your life and relationships. Brainstorm ways in which you could live this out. Choose one behavior at a time for intentional practice. Seek out others who might be mentors in this area. As you grow, repeat the process and select another “growing edge” to continue the adventure of lifelong learning and spiritual growth.^{vi}

One lesson from the Sermon on the Mount that continues to challenge me is, “Do not judge... Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (Matthew 7:1-5).

I tend to become frustrated when someone is so adamant in their opinion that they will not even listen to another viewpoint. They are automatically right and I am wrong. I end up judging them and their opinion, trapped in the same behavior that I dislike in them. I need to spend more time listening to them and understanding their perspective. In doing so, I will likely learn something and perhaps they will take my example and be more willing to listen to an alternative viewpoint. Without fully listening to the other, we erect barriers that prevent full relationship. A behavior I want to cultivate is phrased best by Stephen Covey, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”^{vii}

The life of Christian discipleship is one of intentionality, action, and commitment. It cannot be lived simply by coming to worship for one hour a week. It is a discipline, like brushing our teeth. We can't keep our teeth clean by going to the dentist once every six months, nor even by brushing our teeth once a week. We brush them daily, sometimes two or three times a day, in order to keep them healthy. The Christian life requires such daily discipline. Last weekend the Men's Breakfast heard a speaker from the Baha'i faith speak about their commitment to reading their holy scriptures twice a day. I wondered how frequently throughout the day United Methodists on an average turn to our scriptures or devotional literature or prayer or meditation or journaling to keep us grounded in our faith and tradition. I confess that I spend too little time reflecting on my growing edges and allowing God to develop my proficiency in compassion. There's another area of growth for me: being disciplined in spending time with God.

The life of a disciple is not simply a momentary decision to follow Jesus; it is a lifetime commitment to learn the teachings and follow the way of life modeled by Jesus. The goal of the apprentice is to become proficient in compassion, not perfect. We can become skilled in grace, but we are never beyond improvement. The Gospels are full of challenges, enough for a lifetime and beyond. Take one of the Master's teachings and let it become your "enlightening annoyance."^{viii} Trust that out of your honest wrestling God will bear fruit for you and for God's purposes for the world.

Master Designer, all around us you unfold the wonders of your love and display symbols of your steadfast presence. The harmony of music stirs our hearts to joy. The cycles of nature with new life springing forth out of old resound with the hope of your promise of resurrection. The touch of a human hand warms us with comfort. We rejoice in the multitude of ways in which you teach us of your love, O God.

We are grateful for Jesus and his enduring teachings which guide our lives even today. Inscribe his lessons on our hearts that we might not only hear them but live them. We hunger for the guidance he offers as we face the challenges of life.

We praise you for the gift of community and this community of faith. We are grateful for the blessing of friendship found here and the opportunities to play and serve together. Bless those among us called to the ministry of teaching, telling the stories of Jesus to our children, youth, and adults. Guide those called to mentor others in the journey of faith, that they might be role models of faithful living.

Weave your spirit of hope into our state, nation, and world, especially into lives and places feeling the impact of financial stress. Uphold those reeling from the loss of employment. Guide us into lives of simplicity so that others might simply live.

May your Spirit move around the world, bringing peace to places of turmoil.
Offer guidance to world leaders and protection to troops called to offer security.

In the face of such great need locally and globally, we renew our
commitment to faithfully follow Jesus, to offer our lives in the serve of one
another.....

ⁱ Elton w. Brown, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Vol. 1*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 286.

ⁱⁱ A.J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), p. 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 16.

^{iv} *Wall Street Journal*, December 26, 2008, quoted in "Century Marks," *The Christian Century*, January 27, 2009, p. 8.

^v Robert C. Morris, "Enlightening Annoyances: Jesus' Teachings as a Spur to Spiritual Growth," *Weavings*, XVI: September/October 2001, p. 41.

^{vi} The basic outline of this process comes from Robert C. Morris, *ibid*, p. 43.

^{vii} Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

^{viii} Morris, *ibid*, p. 45.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA