

The Walk and the Way

1 John 2:3-6

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October 21, 2012, Roll Call Sunday

Most of you remember Woody Allen's maxim that "Eighty percent of success is showing up." Thank you for showing up on Roll Call Sunday. A standard definition of "roll call" is "the calling of the names of people from a list to determine the presence or absence of the listed people." But I kind of prefer the definition of "roll call" from the movie industry: it's the check off list that the assistant director shouts out, concluding with "Roll camera," just before the director shouts, "Action!" I'd like to think of this Roll Call Sunday as a lead-in to action.

The Christian life is not really about just showing up; it's about taking action. Some people may be 80% Christians, present at worship but missing in action. That is not success. Harbor Church does not exist to develop an audience; we do not exist to develop church members; we exist to develop followers of Jesus.

Those verses we read from First John 2 talk about the connection between knowing Jesus and obeying him, between obeying and loving, and between abiding in him and walking as he walked. Let me recap verses 3-6. How do we know if we have come to know Christ? If we obey him. If we say we know Christ and don't obey him, we are lying. Several times in the epistle it's made clear that the big command he is talking about obeying is the command to love. Here the elder John says that whoever obeys Jesus' word has the love of God made complete in his or her life. Then in verse 6—and this is the one I'd like you to underline—he says, "Whoever says 'I abide in him' ought to *walk* as he *walked*."

It's a cliché these days to say about someone, "He talks the talk, but he doesn't walk the walk." That's an expression that comes from the Bible. In both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament "to walk" is metaphorical language for "to live a certain kind of life." A contemporary word for *walk* is "lifestyle." The verses from Deuteronomy with which we began the service (10:12f) ask "What does the Lord your God require of you?" And the answer is: "To reverence Yahweh our God, to walk in all his ways and love him, and to serve Yahweh our God with all our heart and with all our soul, and to obey Yahweh's commands and statutes." You really can't separate out the meaning of all those verbs—reverence, walk in his ways, love, serve, obey. They all point to the same reality of living in relationship with God and doing what God wants. That is the gist of most of what we find in the law and the prophets.

The rabbis for many centuries have spoken of two kinds of teaching: *Halakha* and *Aggadah*. *Halakha* is the ethical teaching about how to live, including all the 613 Torah commands and all the rabbinical commentary on them. The word *halakha* means "the way of walking," from the verb *halakh*, to walk. *Aggadah*, on the other hand, is an Aramaic word for tales or lore, related to the Hebrew word for telling. *Aggadah* includes all the stories of the Bible from the creation to the destruction of the Temple and all the rabbis' expansions of them. So the two sides of teaching are the Telling and the Walking, the stories and the way of life. You may remember that in the book of Acts, the first name given to the Christians was "followers of the Way," a name that is used at least six times, arguably more, in Acts. I was interested to read one Messianic Jewish teacher's comment that "The followers of His Majesty King Yeshua were called 'Followers of *Halakha*' [www.betemunch.org]. The gospel was understood not only as a story to be told but a way of life to be lived. It was a new *halakha* that fulfilled and went beyond the old way of life, the old way of walking. Those who follow Jesus are those who walk as he walked. This is what John is saying in his letter.

I was struck in my study this week how often the words “walk” and “way” appear together. In the New American Standard Bible, the most strictly literal translation which does not substitute something like “live” for the metaphor “walk,” you find that “walk” and “way” occur together in 85 verses. The first time is in Exodus 18:20, “Teach them the statutes and the law, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk.” You find that combination many times in the book of Deuteronomy, which was Jesus’ favorite book. 5:33, “You shall walk in all the way which the Lord your God has commanded you.” 8:6, “You shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God, to walk in his ways and to fear him.” I like the way a couple of psalms use the expression. In Psalm 81:13 God is speaking: “Oh that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways.” Psalm 86:11 is a prayer: “Teach me your way, O Lord; I will walk in your truth.”

It’s clear enough that the Hebrew people thought of their relationship with God as a way of life in which they must walk. It was more than a story. It was more than a belief in God’s existence. It was more than worship. It was a matter of walking in God’s ways, living the life. I don’t think Jesus thought about it any differently. When Jesus said “I am the way,” he was alluding to that whole biblical tradition of walking in the way of God. Jesus was not saying “I am the way” in the sense of “the means.” He didn’t mean I am “the way you get saved” or I am “the way to get to heaven.” He meant “I am the life that you are to live.”

The word “way” in the New Testament is *hodos*—a path, a road, a route. It has the same meaning as “the way” in the Old Testament. It is a path that metaphorically means a way of living. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:13-14) that there are two ways, two paths. In my father-in-law’s home there is hanging a picture of the two ways that he grew up with in Brazil. It shows a narrow road going past a church up a mountainside to heaven; then there is a wide road that passes by the theater and the bar that leads to destruction. But of course Jesus means more than that when he talks about the narrow way that leads to healing and wholeness. It’s not choosing religion over pleasure; that’s not what Jesus did. It’s not choosing to hang out with saints rather than sinners; that’s not what Jesus did. The narrow way is choosing the way of life that Jesus lived.

How would you characterize the Jesus way? You could say that it is the way down that Jesus lived, emptying himself and becoming a slave, he who was rich becoming poor for our sake. You could say that the Jesus way is being a friend of sinners, coming to save rather than to condemn, seeking the missing and the outcast. You could say that the Jesus way is the way spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount: living before God in secret, not judging, not responding with violence, trusting God to provide, not worrying about material things. I made a list of nouns I would say make up the Jesus way: compassion, courage, confidence in God, generosity, peacefulness, faithfulness, servanthood and sacrifice. That’s not far from the list Paul gives of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. That describes a way of life, not a way of believing.

Maybe I’m stating what is obvious to you, but it seems to me that most of my life I’ve heard becoming a Christian described as a choice of what you believe rather than entering a way of life. Of course you have to believe in Jesus, but that is the starting point, not the end point. Eugene Peterson wrote a book a few years ago called *The Jesus Way* [Eerdmans, 2007] in which he said

Jesus as the truth gets far more attention than Jesus as the way. Jesus as the way is the most frequently evaded metaphor among Christians with whom I have worked for fifty years as a North American pastor. We cannot skip the way of Jesus in our hurry to get to the truth of Jesus as he is worshiped and proclaimed.

Peterson also says in that book that “Jesus is an *alternative* to the dominant ways of the world, not a supplement to them,” and that “The North American church at present is conspicuous for replacing the Jesus way with the American way.”

We are always trying to separate believing in Jesus from obeying Jesus. We want to think that we can believe in him just enough to get our ticket punched but not enough to let him change our lives. But First John—among other witnesses—makes clear that if you say you know him but you don’t obey him, you are lying. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it succinctly: “Only the one who obeys believes, and only the one who believes obeys.” That was what Moses already knew: that loving God and reverencing him and walking in his ways are all rolled up together. Jesus warned near the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:21), “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven.” As First John (3:18) later put it, “Let us love not in words or talk but in actions and for real.” Or as James (2:17) says, “Faith that is not accompanied by action is dead.” Believing in Jesus but not walking in the Jesus way is meaningless.

Just showing up is not enough. Talking the talk is not enough. It’s about walking the walk, walking in the Jesus way. Paul, talking about baptism, says that we were buried with Christ and raised with him “so that we too might *walk* in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). He urges us, “If we have been given life by the Spirit, let us also *walk* by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25). In another letter he says, “As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so *walk* in him” (Colossians 2:6).

Some will say that we run the risk of turning Jesus into a new law by emphasizing his way of life. Some will say that we risk moralizing the gospel and turning the church into an ethical culture society. There is a risk if we forget that Jesus died for us and rose victorious to reign as one with God, if we think that our life with God is something we earn for ourselves rather than sheer grace. But I think there is a greater risk if we make being a Christian all about what you believe rather than what you live, if we separate knowing from obeying and abiding from walking. What we have been offered in Christ is a way of life which is also life itself. I don’t think we can walk in his way alone. We need to be the church for one another, living out that love for one another which he commanded and making the Jesus way real on Block Island.