

Proper 8/Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

“ ‘Come, Follow Me,’ the Savior Spake” (*Lutheran Service Book* #688)

“Follow Me”

“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’ “ [Matthew 16:24]

“Jesus wants followers, not admirers.” — Soren Kierkegaard

The familiar words from Jesus to his disciples in this verse from Matthew’s Gospel (and similar passages) remind us of the hard reality of true Christian discipleship. But these verses are *so* familiar to us and, after all, we are *very* active in his Church. Our response is quick and affirmative—“Of course, we’re following you, Jesus, look how busy we are!”

But a deeper, more thoughtful introspection reveals the troubling truth—daily we come up short.

“Remember, Lord, the times you called me
to be your follower and friend?
Your words, your cause, your self enthralled me;
you gave my life a source and end.
My first communion and my vow!
How is our friendship now?” — Jaroslav Vajda

We come up short even with our best efforts. As we learn from Scripture and this hymn, the demands of discipleship are many and difficult. We are called to deny our sinful nature and its desires. We must not only avoid the ways of the world, but flee from them and, in all of this, show unconditional love, graciousness, love and humility.

A tall order! No wonder in our human weakness we fail. But we do not despair in our frailty and imperfections.

Our Good Shepherd does not pull his sheep with a rope. He welcomes, he invites, he goes first and leads by example. When we grow weak, weary of the struggle, stumble along the way, he lifts us up and shows us the way.

“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you,
leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” [1 Peter 2:21]

How does he lift us up, strengthen us and set us forward on the path? By his great gifts of Word and sacrament. And this includes all the ways that the Word comes to us

...as it is read publicly and privately,
...as it is preached upon,
...as it is represented in the visual arts,
...as it danced,
...and as it is sung.

In this great hymn of the Reformation era, 80% of the text is Jesus own words put into our own mouth, and then into our heart, mind, and spirit. What a gift Christian hymnody is! 21st century neuroscience has affirmed music's value in the Church's teaching. Nothing lights up the brain quite like the doing of music (singing or playing). Therefore it is a powerful tool for teaching and for affirming and strengthening us as we continue on our Christian walk and follow Jesus, the Author and Perfector of our faith.

Thanks be to God for Christ's example and his Spirit's good gifts!

Barry L. Bobb
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“Come, follow me,” the Savior spake,
“all in my way abiding;
deny yourselves, the world forsake,
obey my call and guiding.
O bear the cross, whate'er betide,
take my example for your guide.”

“I am the light, I light the way,
a godly life displaying;
I bid you walk as in the day;
I keep your feet from straying.
I am the way, and well I show
how you must sojourn here below.”

“My heart abounds in lowliness,
my soul with love is glowing;
and gracious words my lips express,

with meekness overflowing.
My heart, my mind, my strength, my all,
to God I yield, on him I call.”

“I teach you how to shun and flee
what harms your soul’s salvation,
your heart from ev’ry guile to free,
from sin and its temptation.
I am the refuge of the soul,
and lead you to your heav’nly goal.”

Then let us follow Christ, our Lord,
and take the cross appointed
and, firmly clinging to his Word,
in suff’ring be undaunted.
For those who bear the battle’s strain
the crown of heav’nly life obtain.

Text: Johann Scheffler, 1624—77 (stanzas 1, 2, 3, 5)
Anonymous /*Geistliche Lieder und Lobgesänge*, 1695 (stanza 4)
English translation by Charles W. Schaeffer, 1813—96
Tune: MACHS MIT MIR, GOTT Bartholomäus Gesius, c. 1555—1613,
adapted by Johann Hermann Schein, 1586—1630

Both text and tune are in the public domain.

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and duplicated for local use.]

500th Anniversary Notes

As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, many of our hymns have a special connection to our vibrant heritage.

As Paul Westermeyer reminds us, this hymn comes out of “the flowering of music that the Lutheran Reformation stimulated.” Scheffler was a Polish Lutheran who knew the cross of persecution for his evangelical faith. This hymn embodies the Lutheran teaching that congregational song not only offers prayer and praise, it also can teach. James Mearns, in the Julian *Dictionary of Hymnody*, describes it as “a masterpiece of Scriptural didactic poetry.” The English translator of this hymn text, Charles William Schaeffer, taught at the Lutheran Seminary

in Philadelphia, served as President of the General Council and the General Synod and wrote the book, *Early History of the Lutheran Church in America* (1857).

Gesius wrote the tune for a different hymn. But it was Schein who really fashioned it into the melody we now know. An important figure in Lutheran church music, Schein, with connections to Saxony, Dresden, and Leipzig, composed almost a 100 chorale tunes and much sacred vocal music almost a 100 years before J. S. Bach.

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(If you are reading this devotion in a group, you may want to conclude with this...)

Affirmation of Christian Vocation

L: Sisters and brothers, both your work and your rest are in Almighty God. Will you endeavor to pattern your life on the Lord Jesus Christ, in gratitude to God and in service to others, at morning and evening, at work and at play, all the days of your life?

C: We will, and we ask God to help us.

L: Almighty God, by the power of the Spirit you have knit these your servants into the one body of your Son, Jesus Christ. Look with favor upon them in their commitment to serve in Christ's name. Give them courage, patience, and vision; and strengthen us all in our Christian vocation of witness to the world and of service to others; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C: Amen.

[Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 84]