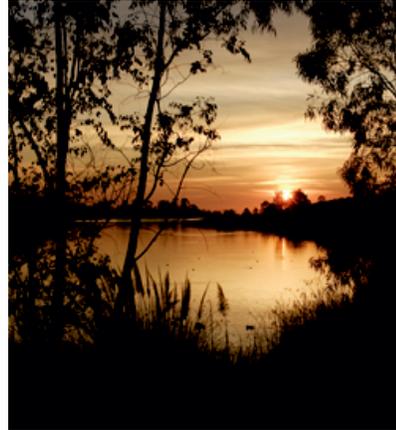


For Your Steps Alone

June 2024

We do a million things to avoid being just alone with God. We fill our schedules with busy activities to keep moving and avoid being still. The sophisticated entertainment industry today keeps us on the edge of our seats tantalizing us with the next TV series or movie episodes, sports extravaganza, or betting opportunities. We are frightened by the prospect of boredom, the most dreaded of all human circumstances. Meanwhile, God waits patiently for us, until our earthly options run dry; until we become exhausted thinking only of ourselves and the constant guilt, confusion, or worries that plague us. Our Lord is the Bread of Life, the Living Water, and the only source of comfort and peace which completely satisfies our souls. The Bible tells us he will never leave us and will never let us down. With open and loving arms, Jesus is waiting for us to stop running so he can give us the abundant life he has waiting for us.



I remember one day in 1983, lying on my back on a small bed in the house of my host family in Barrio Desamparados in San Jose, Costa Rica, wondering how I ever got there. I was 27, having just left my business career in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and was in the thick of immersive language learning with 200 other missionaries at the Spanish Language Institute of San Jose. It is not easy trying to learn another language from scratch. It was like being thrown in the deep end being told to learn to swim. I was dying to talk with someone in English so we could tell jokes and laugh about familiar things from our pasts. Although it was a lonely time, I remember thinking there was no place on earth I would rather be. I had followed the Lord's calling to be there to learn Spanish and help a mission organization begin a new church. Back home, before I departed, I had sold all my possessions, pooled all my resources, and decided to invest entirely in this new, unknown life of ministry.

No one in my family had ever been a minister or priest and I was raised to be a businessman or at least a good manager of people. During his whole life my father taught management and hospital administration at business schools in the Midwest. My four siblings obtained master's degrees and pursued careers in business. I was the lone ranger with a master's degree in divinity. I was in uncharted territory in Costa Rica for nearly two years not knowing how my new life and career would unfold. What I did know was I had found the source of life, Christ himself, and I was never going to let him go; and I prayed he would



never let me go. I was willing to be uncomfortable, even suffer, and do whatever I needed to do to follow him. During those beginning months in Costa Rica, I dug deeper in trusting the Lord with my life. I eventually finished all my language learning and helped fellow missionaries form a brand-new congregation of faithful followers of Jesus in Barrio Cordoba, which still flourishes today.

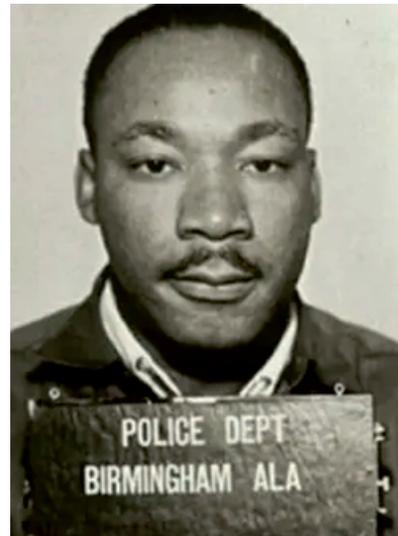
Jesus knows that it is not easy to keep following him. Many people begin the journey of becoming a disciple but fall away in midstream for many different reasons. The Gospels warn us that it can be tough to follow Jesus because he demands we give up more of ourselves and our control to him. The New Testament stories capture this sentiment beautifully. The 12 disciples were constantly challenged but kept following Jesus through thick and thin. Many others in the crowd followed him, too, including members of Jesus' own family. However, at one point in his ministry, Jesus noticed many in the crowd were beginning to fade away, not willing to pay the higher cost of discipleship. He turned to Peter and asked, "Are you also going to leave?". Peter responded with these famous words, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. We believe, and we know you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:67b-69) Thank God Peter kept following Jesus because he became an apostle, indispensable in helping form the First Century Church.

Many people in our world today are falling prey to a mob mentality. Many political, religious, and corporate leaders seem like bullies demanding complete allegiance to them and their cause. If people refuse to follow these so-called leaders, they are bombarded with a barrage of verbal campaigns to shun or attack their integrity and reputation. These new leaders and their followers seem unable to be in the same room with those who hold different views, no matter how slight. It is very sad to watch this turn of events in our world today. Such behavior could not be further from the teachings of Christ or what most people consider to be characteristics of mature people. Jesus respected all people no matter how divergent his view was from theirs. He gave everyone the freedom to embrace his teachings and follow him, or not. And today, it's the same. It is our choice. He never bullies or shames us into making that decision.

Many phenomenal people in history have walked down lonely paths willing to step outside the terribly destructive influence of the mob. Martin Luther was willing to confront a morally corrupt church in medieval times and say, "Here I stand, I can do no other," as he pointed people back to the truths of Scripture and the teachings of Jesus. The famous German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was willing to stand up to Adolph Hitler and the Nazis, refusing to participate in their evil cause, even though it cost him his life. Martin Luther King, Jr. confronted the darkness of racism in America, which cost him his life, too. All these brave and faithful men were willing to challenge the bullies and mobs of their day. They were willing to walk down very lonely roads

with only the Lord as their guide, their hope, and the source of strength and life. God honored each of them by creating grace-filled and powerfully effective movements which followed them. They were all followers of Jesus, believing in the one who himself was crucified for staying true to the will of God in his own life.

Each of us at some point will come face-to-face with the narrow gate. It will make us feel uncomfortable and cause us to reconsider our commitment to our Lord. Jesus told his disciples, "You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it." (Matthew 7:13,14) The gate to an abundant and eternal life is narrow because our fallen, self-centered



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. 1963 Mugshot

human nature needs it to be that way. We need the discipline of Jesus' teachings to keep us on the straight and narrow path. Too often, everything in us wants to avoid the narrow gate so we can take back control of our lives and be in command again, constructing a spirituality or religion which is far less demanding, and easier, we think, to accomplish. However, that is not what Jesus taught. True Christianity does not work that way. We need to be brave and trusting enough to walk through that narrow gate alone, all by ourselves with the Lord as our guide and shepherd. He will lead us to still and peaceful waters if we keep following him.

The Psalmist wrote, "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) When we finally get away from the crowds and find a place to be alone in the silence with our God, we can begin the journey of discovering who we were created to be. We can become aware of our own unique gifts, interests, and purposes apart from the frenzied crowds which surround us. In our quiet times of silence, we can develop a stronger awareness and trust in our Lord. We can confront our needless and often debilitating worries. We can become empowered to accomplish his will for our lives, no matter how lonely it might feel at times.

There is an old song from my past that says: "There is a road, no simple highway between the dawn and the dark of night. And if you go, no one may follow. That path is for your steps alone."

And there is wisdom from scripture that says: "The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day." (Proverbs 4:18)

That is the path we are being called to follow. May we encourage each other to take one, important step at a time.

I hope you and your family have a wonderful summer. May our Lord be with you and your steps alone.