

Stepping Up to the Plate
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(John 1:43–51 NRSV) The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." {44} Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. {45} Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." {46} Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." {47} When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" {48} Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." {49} Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" {50} Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." {51} And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Do you remember the BE LIKE MIKE commercials of a few years ago.

How can any of us from Chicagoland forget.

They were wonderful commercials encouraging us to be like Michael Jordan.

I wanted to remind you of those commercials because there's a lot of confusion about what it means to be called by Jesus and to be "like" Jesus.

Most of us sing "Lord, I Want to Be Like Jesus in-a My Heart" — without considering what, exactly, does it mean to be like Jesus?

When I was in college, and again in seminary I was required to read Thomas á Kempis 15th-century work *The Imitation of Christ*. And was fascinated by his challenge calling us to imitate Christ.

What does it mean to imitate Christ?
Are we called to be twins, mirror twins of Jesus?

Our reading today is about the calling of two people who became disciples of Jesus. One was Philip and the other Nathanael, and it's their story that may help us arrive at a different understanding.

For one thing, in terms of personality and drivenness, neither one was much like Jesus to begin with, and we don't have a biblical record of them becoming carbon copies of Jesus later either.

Philip, based on the little bit we know about him, seems to have had something of the missionary instinct.

I suggest that because he wanted to tell his friend Nathanael about meeting Jesus.

But at the same time, Phillip seems to have had a hard time really understanding who Jesus was. Remember, it was Philip who told Jesus to send the people away because there was not enough food or resources to feed the 5,000 or so who had come out to hear Jesus.

Philip also seemed to lack a decisive streak — for when some Greeks approached Philip about meeting Jesus, Philip took the request to Andrew rather than acting on his own.

Nathanael, is the other future disciple in our reading today. He appears as a skeptic — a religious skeptic, mind you — but a skeptic nonetheless.

Hearing that Jesus was from Nazareth, he wonders aloud if anything good can come from that place.

Most scholars believe that the person in our story (Nathanael) is known by the name of Bartholomew in the other three gospels. What is interesting is we know virtually nothing about Nathaniel/Bartholomew.

It is clear that he is not outspoken like Peter or even verbal about his doubts like Thomas.

From John's gospel we see that he does seem to have one virtuous characteristic, for Jesus calls him "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." That's unquestionably a compliment, but having a lack of deceit is hardly the same thing as active discipleship.

Even as he starts to believe Jesus is the Son of God, it's not because he has some innate faith, but because Jesus told him something about himself that a normal person could not possibly have known.

It is pretty clear that neither Philip nor Nathaniel is a mirror copy or twin of Jesus. But what is important for us to remember is that Jesus never asks them

to be a copy or his twin.

What does Jesus ask of them . . .

FOLLOW ME

And it seems apparent that they did just that.

According to some non-canonical works (books that have stories about the Biblical people but were not included in our Bible) both Philip and Nathaniel carried the gospel to other parts of the world and died martyrs' deaths.

We have no way of knowing if any of those stories are true, but they suggest that these two remained faithful to Jesus.

The Bible itself has no hesitation in telling about the betrayal of Jesus by Judas and the denial of Jesus by Peter, so if either Philip or Nathaniel had fallen away, the New Testament surely would have mentioned it. Instead, it tells us that after the death of Judas and the ascension of Jesus, there are still 11 disciples faithfully gathered in Jesus' name (Acts 1:26).

And the reason that we would say that they stepped up to the plate was not that they began resembling Jesus or that they changed their personalities, but rather it was their willingness to be used by God that could be called Christlike.

Jesus never said to them, nor does he say to us: "Be like me."

We have not been called to be a mirror image of Jesus, nor to be his twin — rather we have been called to be his DISCIPLE.

The fact is, if we were to really try to be like Jesus in the sense of copying his mannerisms and his way of dealing with daily tasks, we'd end up frustrated because we simply don't have the kind of information to do that.

We have four gospels, but none of them is a biography in any sense of the word.

What they are is testimonies about Jesus that include some biographical incidents, but even those are told through the lens of the faith of the gospel writer or the conviction of the Christian community to which the gospel writer belonged.

That's especially true in John's gospel, and he freely admits it.

Near the end of his gospel, John writes,

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30–31).

In other words, John’s gospel is more a theological reflection on the meaning of Jesus’ life than a chronological account of his activities.

We see Jesus through the faith-biased eyes of believers in the first-century church.

That is not to say that they present a false Jesus. It’s simply to say *that they’re not concerned with the kind of detail we’d need if we really wanted to be like Jesus.*

Even professional actors have a hard time when it comes to acting like someone else.

Take for example, the actor Morlan Higgins, who won awards for portraying the late Afrikaner actor Andre Huguenet in the autobiographical play *Exits and Entrances*.

Higgins had to work hard to re-create Huguenet’s performing style. He spent a lot of time talking with people who had known Huguenet. Then, because Huguenet’s acting style was much bigger than and very different from Higgins’ natural style, Higgins had to do a lot of work with his own approach to the stage. He said most people have internal “governors” that keep them from being hams, but to play Huguenet, Higgins had to figure out how to turn his governor off. As you can imagine, that required a huge energy output that could not be sustained indefinitely.

Jesus never said “Be like me.”
He said “Follow me.”

One of the interesting things about today’s disciples is the wide variety of people who make up the body of Christ.

To listen to the critics of Christianity tell it, most Christians are deluded, poor thinkers or mindless sheep. And if you look at actual Christians, you will find a few folks who fit that description. But those labels in no way cover the broad population of the church.

The church is comprised of:
dull people & smart people,
brilliant people & stupid people.

There are single-talented people and multitalented people.
There are cowards for Jesus and heroes for Jesus.

In worship, you'll find friendly people, cranky people, irritable people, unruffled people, welcoming people.

The church has its share of both doers and thinkers.
There are no types left out.

What I am trying to say is that when Jesus calls us to follow him, he does not ask us to cease being the unique persons that we are and become his mirror image or twin.

What he wants us to do is to step up to the plate, and we do that by opening ourselves to be God's persons.

We should strive to be like Jesus in loving God and loving our neighbor, but we have to do that through our own talents, abilities, hang-ups, shortcomings and insights.

We're to be disciples, not twins.

Our prayer should be something like, "O Lord, take who I am, all that I've got and use it for the kingdom. Where I fall short, mold me as you want me to be ..."

There is some value of the WWJD question that was popular among youth groups a few years ago.

But perhaps a more realistic version of it is, WSIDAAFOJ?

What Should I Do As A Follower Of Jesus?

But, then, that would be hard to get on a wrist band, probably.

To answer that last question (what should I do as a follower of Jesus), we need to know as much as we can about Jesus.

So we need to get engaged in Bible study ---

But at the same time we also need to open ourselves up to God so that the Holy Spirit can flow through our personalities.

We can never be just like him, but we can live so that people catch a glimpse of him through us.