

The Privilege of Following Christ

All-Inclusive Faith

21.05.02 | Tom Loewen

When was the last time you thought, “*I can’t wait until I get to the point in my life when... [fill in the blank]*”? Lately, it’s a constant drone in our home, especially for our youngest, Hudson who, at three years old, is endlessly frustrated that he can’t do everything his big sister can. He can’t wait until he no longer has to wear a pull-up to bed, like his big sister; until he can sew with a needle, like his big sister; until he can eat rice with chopsticks, like his big sister. And he can’t wait until he can ride a horse without mom holding the reins, like his big sister.

When we’re young, we all feel like Hudson: we can’t wait until we’re old enough to drive, old enough to date, old enough to get a job and move out. But this feeling doesn’t fully leave us as we get older. At 43, I still feel this way: I can’t wait until my mortgage is paid off, until all my kids are old enough to wipe their *own* bums, until our house renovations are finished, until I can begin imagining retirement, until I no longer feel like all my musician friends are better than I am.

Whether we’re raising kids, or just trying to figure out how to be adults ourselves, we all share some basic ideas about what being a *real* grown-up looks like. It’s about attaining a level of mastery and control, acquiring a level of ownership and possession, and achieving a level of independence and self-reliance. We want this for our kids, and for ourselves, and lately I’ve been realizing that we often apply this same definition of maturity to our *spiritual* lives.

Like, when we're just starting out in our faith, we don't know how to pray, we don't possess any Biblical knowledge, and need lots of mentoring and support to help us tackle the sin that controls our lives. But by the time we become spiritually mature, we've *mastered* the art of prayer, *acquired* cover-to-cover, chapter-and-verse Bible-knowledge, and no longer depend on help to manage our sin. At least, that's what it's *supposed* to look like... right? But what if I told you that that is the *exact opposite* of how Jesus describes what it looks like to become a spiritual grown-up.

Jesus' closest friend was His disciple John, who, in his biographical gospel account, describes a conversation between Jesus and Peter, the leader on whom Jesus said He would build the church. Envisioning Peter's influential trajectory, listen to how Jesus describes his future:

"I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."
(John 21:18)

According to Jesus, maturing in our faith is not about attaining, acquiring, and achieving some level of control, ownership and independence; those are the qualities of spiritual adolescence. Becoming a spiritual adult is actually about embracing surrender, sacrifice, and submission; it's about being willing to be led to places we don't want to go.

I wonder how many of us have felt in this recent message series like we're being *led to places we don't want to go*. On week one, we discovered that, while all people are created equal, some of us – *those considered to be the least!* – can actually reveal the nature of God *better than others*, according to Jesus. Then two weeks ago, we learned that, while all are needed in the body of Christ, the Bible says that some are *more needed than others* – the very ones we're tempted to under-value. And last week, we declared that all are welcome, but that, according to Jesus, some are *more welcome than others* – specifically those who often feel the most *unwelcome*. Throughout this series, we've invited people who've been devalued, marginalized and excluded because of race, disability and sexual orientation to be honest with us about their experience. It's been *uncomfortable* to say the least! But what if, as Julia Chikemboro said three weeks ago, being *uncomfortable*, being *led to places we don't want to go* – to stare at realities we don't want to see, and own up to behaviours we don't want to change – is exactly what Jesus wants for us? What if maturity means being led to the very *last* place any of us would choose to go? Because that's *exactly* how John explains what Jesus meant in His uncomfortable conversation with Peter:

“[Jesus] said this to show the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. After saying this, Jesus said to Peter, ‘Follow me.’” (John 21:19)

History tells us that Peter *did* in fact follow Jesus in death by being crucified. But Jesus' words here are not meant only to be understood as a prediction about Peter. They are a summary of the invitation of Jesus for all of us to follow Him, as the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 2:5-8:

“Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus: Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Here, we see Jesus selflessly relinquishing every last drop of power and privilege for the benefit of others. First, relinquishing His status as God, to become human. Then, sacrificing the dignity of humanity for the degrading life of a slave. He then lays down that life in death, and finally He embraces the shame and humiliation of being crucified as a common criminal and failed revolutionary. To be clear, Jesus was being led where *He* didn't want to go. We're told the cross made Jesus so anxious that ***“His sweat became like drops of blood” (Luke 22:44)***, as He begged God for another way. But Jesus rejects the way of comfort and privilege, instead choosing the way of discomfort and sacrifice, the way of the cross, inviting Peter – *and us* – to do the same.

Now, I assume most of us would say we want to follow Jesus. But do we—do *I*—really want to follow Jesus in *the way of the cross*? I mean, if I'm fully honest, I haven't *relinquished* my power and privilege like Jesus; I've *relied* on it, intentionally and unemotionally. Like many of you, my life demonstrates a subconscious belief that my faith should provide me and my family with certain benefits and advantages, a certain level of comfort and security. Faith isn't seen as something meant to dispossess me of these advantages, but to reinforce and solidify them, to help me gain mastery, possession and independence, and to centre me and my experience.

You see this in how, like many of you, I tend to flock together with birds whose feathers are the same colour as mine; I listen to worship songs, sermons, and podcasts that connect emotionally with *my* reality, rather than ones that push me to orient my life around someone *else's*. I get involved in programs that give me the chance to use my gifts, not the hidden, thankless ones that require more time and effort than I want to give; we *like* the social media posts we agree with and block posters who's views offend us, creating algorithmic echo-chambers that reinforce our ways of thinking and make us wonder why some people just don't "get it"; we give only to the level of our comfort, not the level of our capacity; we are drawn to environments that validate our desire for upward mobility, not ones that demands we sacrifice our own advancement to see *others* move up. We've loved our neighbour, but not as much as we love ourselves. We act as though everyone should care about the issues that affect us, but don't take the time to learn about issues we think don't even matter, simply because they don't matter to *us*.

If we were to be completely candid, we'd admit that when we think of an *all-inclusive* faith, we're more drawn to the *all-inclusive resort* kind of faith that prioritizes and pampers *me*, more than to the kind that means I have to move out of the way to make room for someone *else's* experience, prioritize someone *else's* contribution, and listen on someone *else's* voice. Unlike the Jesus we claim to follow, we don't *curse* power and privilege, we *cling* to it, even convincing ourselves that it's a sign of God's "*blessing*". All this has led to what I refer to as "Christian Supremacy" – a belief that God made the world and all its bounty to benefit and revolve around us, seeing our privilege as a sort of spiritual *birthright*.

And the result has been, as Mike said last week, a church where Sunday mornings are the most segregated hour of the week, where Christians are known for our politics more than our love, claiming to be a “moral majority” while trampling the rights, denying the dignity, and ignoring the voices of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour. We use phrases like, “come as you are”, but then belittle those attempting to transition into a truer version of themselves. We quote Jesus, who said, ***“I came, not for the healthy, but the sick”***, but ignore and avoid people with developmental disabilities, individuals on the autism spectrum, or those who struggle with mental health.

This isn't what following Jesus should look like! The church isn't meant to be a club for people with wealth, talent, business acumen and stage presence, people from traditional families, who look like us and don't make us uncomfortable. It doesn't exist to cater to the already initiated and accepted. Quite the opposite, the church – *we, not the organization, but all of us individually and together as people* – exist, not to serve ourselves, but to care for those who have nothing – the poor, the sick, the outcast, and abandoned. The earliest churches were communities built not around the “haves” but the “have-nots”, led by day-labourers, social and literal lepers, women, singles, the poor, disabled, and the sexually scandalized. Upon the very people the religious elite despised, Christ built His church. God was able to do this because those earliest followers understood that *this is* what spiritual maturity looks like. *This* the way of Jesus, the way of the *cross*, of increasingly laying down our privilege.

I'm currently reading a book that challenges readers to identify their own privilege. It's helped me, for the first time, see with clarity the privilege that comes with being a:

21st century, white, straight, married, cis-gendered, male, child-fathering, intelligent, educated, employed, wealthy, middle-aged, able-bodied, neuro-typical, addiction-free, healthy, land-owning, land-lording, first-word-dwelling, passport-holding, Christian, natural-born citizen of the country in which I live, from an intact, living middle-class nuclear family with almost unlimited community support, and no criminal record.

On top of all this, I realize I began by showing a video of my daughter riding on her own pony (*cue the Seinfeld reference!*), so what I'm about to say applies first and most to me. To the privileged like me: equality can feel like oppression – *because we're not used to it* – but it's *not*. We with privilege must learn to de-center ourselves in order to prioritize those who've been (and are still being) de-prioritized by society and the church, to learn that privilege isn't something *good* to be *shared*; it's something *harmful* to be *dismantled*. That's why we can't think of diversity as an act of *charity* – *giving a little bit of our power and privilege away to those in need* – but as an act of *discipleship*, without which we will never experience the fullness of God's kingdom.

If that wasn't clear enough, I'll say it again: we live in a system that offers advantages and privileges to people based on our *white-ness*, our *straight-ness*, our *male-ness*, our *neuro-typical-ness*, our *able-bodied-ness*, and other superficial characteristics, even our Christianity. This is the very systemic injustice Christ died,

in part, to dismantle. I'm not saying that white-ness, straight-ness, male-ness, (etc...) are bad; in fact, these things can also reflect the image of God. But any way these unearned qualities make life easier on us or better for us, at the expense of others, is an example of injustice, harmful to the furthering of God's kingdom. And the only way to deal with them, is to become aware of them, address them honestly, and nail them to the cross with Christ.

I know how overwhelming this all sounds, but imagine how good it could be! Imagine a church where everyone can see someone who looks like them on our screens, stages, and at all levels of leadership, where we run our *highest*-quality programming for kids with Down's syndrome, Autism, and cerebral palsy, in a way that's fully accessible to every body. Imagine letting God show us what it looks like to make amends with our Indigenous siblings, and being led by them in things like peace-making, slow listening, and creation care; imagine the Black people around us no longer having to wonder if their lives matter; imagine doing the hard work of welcoming immigrants, not just into our country, but into our community. Imagine *us* becoming the people LGBTQ+ individuals feel the *safest* around, the *most* loved by, seen, not as pariahs but prophets of grace and acceptance; imagine the singles in our circles being treated not as anomalies or oddities but honoured as some of our most valued family members; imagine what we could learn about true family from single parents, adopted children and parents of blended families, if they were honored as heroes and healers. Imagine, instead of mocking millennials, we encouraged and handed over leadership to our youth, not forgetting to be guided and guarded by the wisdom of the elderly among us; imagine showing hospitality in our words, loving people enough to use the pronouns and labels they choose for themselves; imagine "*blessed are the poor*" being more than a saying. Imagine

following Jesus so closely that *every* person – *no matter what they look like, who they love, or how they identify or differ from us* – felt loved, included, and valued, becoming a community where outsiders become insiders, foreigners become neighbours, enemies become friends, and strangers become siblings; where age, gender, race, sexuality, disability, neuro-diversity, life-stage, level of education, and financial instability are not viewed as *barriers* to realizing God’s ideal, but as *bridges* into a new world that looks a lot more like the **“every nation, tribe, and tongue”** full-spectrum, all-inclusive diversity of God’s *entire* family. If you, like me, want to follow Jesus into *that* kind of future, it takes more than just believing, wanting, hoping, or even praying for it. As a Black member of Southridge said to me at the height of the BLM protests last year, *“only doing something, does something.”* We have to work for it, every day, for the rest of our lives, willing and eager to practically lay down our privilege with Christ.

Maybe your first step is more awareness. Take time to journal your way through a book like, *Me & White Supremacy* or start conversations with people who don’t share your privilege, with the sole intention of listening, learning, being changed by God. Maybe it’s time to forge some relationships with individuals on the margins. You could email Nate Dirks [**address on screen**] who will help you get involved in one of our anchor causes, not as an act of charity but to develop friendships that truly make a difference, or visit the Niagara Regional Native Centre (when it’s open again), or one of the local reserves, to see firsthand the impact that our *“home and native land”* has had on its First People. Perhaps your next step is to take some concrete action, like doing an audit of your vocabulary to rid yourself of certain words and phrases that mock and insult people without privilege, like “that’s lame,” “that sucks,” and “that’s crazy” (or dozens of other common expressions

that you may not even realize are dehumanizing to certain groups) or perhaps you need to de-accumulate some your wealth and possessions to redirect them to those who face significant barriers to earning a liveable wage. Maybe your next step is one of advocacy, working for more “level ground” accessibility for people who tend to get excluded (on purpose or by accident) in the places where you work or play. Maybe, perhaps most important of all, you need to get away with God in prayer, to listen and be directed to what your next step down “the way of the cross.” Whatever you do, don’t just sit back and agree (or disagree), remaining stuck in inactivity. Because, at the end of the day, the only thing that does something, is doing something.

I don’t know about you, but I can’t wait until you and I will finally be grown-up enough to follow Jesus like that! To become people who maturely trade in our comfort for the cross, to be led by God to places we don’t want to go, places we haven’t even imagined yet, and there discover the unimaginable beauty and diversity of an all-inclusive faith in an all-inclusive God.

As we’ve been doing throughout this series, we’re now going to hear from someone who’s been processing what this needs to look like in their life. Here’s Ron Dyck: