

“What, Indeed?”

Matthew 5:13-16 ¹

It was Friday morning. The Rev. Henry Maxwell was working on Sunday’s sermon. There had been many interruptions, and he was made anxious by the slow progress he was making. His text was 1 Peter 2:21, “*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*”²

He was working on the last point, about following Jesus’ example, when the doorbell rang. When Rev. Maxwell opened the door, a rather shabby-looking young man said, “I’m out of a job, sir, and I thought maybe you might put me in the way of getting something.”

“I don’t know of anything. Jobs are scarce,” Rev. Maxwell replied, beginning to shut the door.

“I thought you might perhaps be able to recommend me to the city railway or something,” continued the young man, shifting his faded hat from one hand to the other, nervously.

“It would be no use. You will have to excuse me. I am very busy this morning. I hope you will find something.”

The Rev. Henry Maxwell returned to his study. He paused as he watched the dejected, homeless, and forsaken young man walk away from the door, but he went back to work, and the sermon was soon finished.

On Sunday morning, the service at First Church was very, very good. The music was stirring, the sermon was interesting. Suddenly, into the midst of this perfect accord between preacher and audience there came a very remarkable interruption. It would be difficult to indicate the extent of the shock which this interruption caused.

The sermon had come to a close. Mr. Maxwell had just turned the half of the big Bible over on his manuscript and was about to sit down as the quartet prepared to rise and sing the closing selection, when the entire congregation was startled by the sound of a man’s voice. It came from the rear of the church, from one of the seats under the balcony. The next moment the figure of a man came out of the shadow there and walked down the middle aisle. Before the startled congregation had realized what was going on, the man had reached the open space in front of the pulpit and had turned about facing the people.

“I’ve been wondering since I came in here if it would be just the thing to say a word at the close of the service. I’m not drunk and I’m not crazy, and I am perfectly harmless, but if I die, as there is every likelihood I shall in a few days, I want the satisfaction of thinking that I said my say in a place like this, and before this sort of a crowd.”

Mr. Maxwell had not taken his seat, and he now remained standing, leaning on his pulpit, looking down at the stranger. It was the man who had come to his house the Friday before, the same dusty, worn, shabby-looking young man. He had not been shaved and his hair was rough and tangled. It is doubtful if anyone like this had ever confronted the First Church within the sanctuary. They were tolerably familiar with this sort of humanity out on the street, wandering up and down the avenue, but they had never dreamed of such an incident as this so near.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 14, 2018.

² Excerpts from Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1897, 1960), pp. 5-17.

There was nothing offensive in the man's manner or tone. He was not excited, and he spoke in a low but distinct voice. No one in the house made any motion to stop the stranger or in any way to interrupt him.

"I'm not an ordinary tramp, though I don't know of any teaching of Jesus that makes one kind of tramp less worth saving than another. Do you?" He put the question as naturally as if the whole congregation had been a small Bible class. He paused just a moment and coughed painfully. Then he went on.

"I lost my job ten months ago. I am a printer by trade. The new Linotype machines are beautiful specimens of invention, but I know six men who have killed themselves inside of the year just on account of those machines. Of course, I don't blame the newspapers for getting the machines. Meanwhile, what can a man do? I know I never learned but the one trade, and that's all that I can do. I've tramped all over the country trying to find something. There are a good many others like me. I'm not complaining, am I? Just stating facts.

"But I was wondering as I sat there under the balcony if what you call following Jesus is the same thing as what He taught. What did he mean when he said, 'Follow me?' The minister said," here the man turned and looked up at the pulpit, "that it is necessary for the disciple of Jesus to follow in his steps, and he said the steps are 'obedience, faith, love, and imitation.' But I did not hear him tell you just what he meant that to mean, especially the last step. What do you Christians mean by following the steps of Jesus?"

"I've tramped through this city for three days trying to find a job; and in all that time I've not had a word of sympathy or comfort except from your minister here, who said he was sorry for me and hoped I would find a job somewhere. I suppose it is because you get so imposed on by the professional tramp that you have lost your interest in any other sort. I'm not blaming anybody, am I? Just stating facts. Of course, I understand you can't all go out of your way to hunt jobs for other people like me. I'm not asking you to; but what I feel puzzled about is, **what is meant by following Jesus?**

"What do you mean when you sing 'I'll go with him, with him, all the way?' Do you mean that you are suffering and denying yourselves and trying to save lost, suffering humanity just as I understand Jesus did? What do you mean by it? I see the ragged edge of things a good deal. I understand there are more than 500 men in this city in my case. Most of them have families.

"My wife died four months ago. I'm glad she's out of trouble. My little girl is staying with a printer's family until I find a job. Somehow, I get puzzled when I see so many Christians living in luxury and singing 'Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow thee,' and remember how my wife died in a tenement in New York City, gasping for air and asking God to take the little girl, too.

"Of course, I don't expect you people can prevent everyone from dying of starvation, lack of proper nourishment and tenement air, but what does following Jesus mean? I understand that Christian people own a good many of the tenements. A member of a church was the owner of the one where my wife died, and I have wondered if following Jesus 'all the way' was true in his case.

"I heard some people singing at a church prayer meeting the other night, 'All for Jesus, all for Jesus, all my being's ransomed powers, all my thoughts, and all my doings, all my days, and all my hours,' and I kept wondering as I sat on the steps outside just what they meant by it. It seems to me there's an awful lot of trouble in the world that somehow wouldn't exist if all the people who sing such songs went and lived them out. I suppose I don't understand. But **what would Jesus do?**"

The man suddenly gave a strange lurch over in the direction of the communion table and laid one grimy hand upon it. Then he passed his other hand across his eyes, and fell heavily forward on his face, full length up the aisle. A week later he was dead. . . .

At the conclusion of the service on the next Sunday, Henry Maxwell paused and looked into the faces of his people. There were some strong, earnest men and women in the First Church.

He could see Edward Norman, editor of the *Raymond Daily News*. He had been a member of the First Church for ten years. No man was more honored in the community.

There was Alexander Powers, superintendent of the great railroad shops in Raymond, a typical railroad man, one who had been born into the business. There sat Donald Marsh, president of Lincoln College, situated in the suburbs of Raymond. There was Milton Wright, one of the great merchants of Raymond, having in his employ at least a hundred men in various shops. There was Dr. West, who, although still comparatively young, was quoted as authority in special surgical cases.

There was young Jasper Chase the author, who had written one successful book and was said to be at work on a new novel. There was Virginia Page the heiress, who through the recent death of her father had inherited a million at least, and was gifted with unusual attractions of person and intellect. And not least of all, Rachel Winslow, from her seat in the choir, glowed with her peculiar beauty of light this morning because she was so intensely interested in the whole scene.

There was some reason, perhaps, in view of such material in the First Church, for Henry Maxwell's feeling of satisfaction whenever he considered his parish as he had the previous Sunday. There was an unusually large number of strong, individual characters who claimed membership there. But as he noted their faces this morning he was simply wondering how many of them would respond to the strange proposition he was about to make. He continued slowly, taking time to choose his words carefully, and giving the people an impression they had never felt before, even when he was at his best with his most dramatic delivery.

"What I am going to propose now is something which ought not to appear unusual or at all impossible of execution. Yet I am aware that it will be so regarded by a large number, perhaps, of the members of this church. But in order that we may have a thorough understanding of what we are considering, I will put my proposition very plainly, perhaps bluntly: I want volunteers from the First Church who will pledge themselves, earnestly and honestly for an entire year, not to do anything without first asking the question, 'What would Jesus do?' And after asking that question, each one will follow Jesus as exactly as he knows how, no matter what the result may be. I will of course include myself in this company of volunteers, and shall take for granted that my church here will not be surprised at my future conduct, as based upon this standard of action, and will not oppose whatever is done if they think Christ would do it.

"Have I made my meaning clear? At the close of the service I want all those members who are willing to join such a company to remain and we will talk over the details of the plan. Our motto will be, 'What would Jesus do?' *Our aim will be to act just as He would if He was in our places, regardless of immediate results. In other words, we propose to follow Jesus' steps as closely and as literally as we believe He taught His disciples to do.* And those who volunteer to do this will pledge themselves for an entire year, beginning with today, so to act. We must be free from fanaticism on the one hand and too much caution on the other. If Jesus' example is the example for the world to follow, it certainly must be possible to follow it. But we need to

remember this great fact. After we have asked the Spirit to tell us what Jesus would do and have received an answer to it, we are to act regardless of the results to ourselves. . . .”

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Well, this has been an unusual way to do a sermon, and this has, in fact, been most of it. Some of you have probably recognized that this story is the opening of Charles Sheldon’s famous book, *In His Steps*, written in 1896, and thought by some to be the 10<sup>th</sup> most read book in all the history of the world. Henry Maxwell’s text, 1 Peter 2:21, and the unemployed printer’s question, “**What Would Jesus Do?**” are, of course, the source of the **WWJD?** that we frequently see in Christian jewelry and clothing.

Our theme on this morning when we remember Dr. King’s legacy has to do with the stewardship of our influence. Sheldon’s book, *In His Steps*, traces the effects of the influence of the women and men who chose to undertake Henry Maxwell’s challenge—influential effects that transformed their fictitious town, that transformed the real town of Topeka, Kansas, where Sheldon pastored,<sup>3</sup> and that continue to change the world down to this very moment.

**It is just as true today as it was centuries ago that “Christ, who suffered for you, is your example. Follow in his steps”** (1 Peter 2:21). And Jesus was speaking about the stewardship of influence when He told us, “*You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it useful again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless. You are the light of the world—like a city on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see. Don’t hide your light under a basket! Instead, put it on a stand and let it shine for all. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father*” (Matthew 5:13-16).

In Columbia, as well as in Raymond, you and I follow in Jesus’ steps when we do what He would do as we live out our lives in this community. It is not enough to lament the condition of our world. Jesus calls us to be “salt” that seasons and “light” that illumines until God’s Kingdom really does come in Columbia as it is in heaven.

You and I make a difference through serving on civic boards and committees, on boards of directors and trustees, on school boards, and in PTAs. We make a difference by mentoring children at the YWCA and the YMCA, by helping with Vacation Bible School, by teaching preschoolers and children on Sundays and Wednesdays, by serving as youth chaperones and as counselors on youth mission trips.

There really is no limit to the places and the ways in which we might be “salt and light” for Jesus. Many of us are already doing these things, but every one of us is called to this adventure, and we won’t see many miracles if we choose safety over obedience.

Peter and Andrew were mending their nets, minding their own business, when Jesus said to them, “*Come, be my disciples, and I will show you how to fish for people!*” (Matthew 4:19). Have you ever thought about what they would have missed if they’d chosen their familiar nets over following Jesus? As Jesus would later say, “*If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find true life*” (Luke 9:24). You and I face that choice, too—and we face it every day.

Individually and together, we need to ask ourselves, “What Would Jesus Do?” and then we need to DO IT, whatever it takes. Jesus continues to say to us, “*Those who obey my*

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mastersimage.com/articles/ihs.htm>

*commandments are the ones who love me. And because they love me, my Father will love them, and I will love them. And I will reveal myself to each one of them” (John 14:21).*

My friend, do you want Jesus to reveal Himself to you? Do you want this church to truly be “the light of the world”? Do you want this church to be the “salt and light” in Columbia that God intends for us to be? The only way to get there from here is for every one of us to care more about God’s purposes than we do about our own comfort. The only way to get there from here is for every one of us to be obedient to the promptings of God’s Spirit, whatever the instruction, and whatever the cost. Remember this: “*The Kingdom of God is not just fancy talk; it is living by God’s power* (1 Corinthians 4:20).

As I was researching this sermon, I saw something I had never seen before. I noticed that the Internet links that took me to pages about the book *In His Steps* had the letters “ihs” in them, representing the title of the book. Do you remember ever seeing those letters before? Those letters frequently appear on crosses on communion tables and in other Christian art.

What those letters actually represent are the first three letters of Jesus’ name in Greek,<sup>4</sup> but what might happen if we let them remind us of another “ihs,” the book that continues to ask, **“What Would Jesus Do?”**

What would He do, indeed?

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<sup>4</sup> “IHS” = IHΣΥΣ