

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The alien spacecraft breaks through the earth's atmosphere and zooms toward its destination. Hovering above Crabtree Valley Mall and hidden by the low-lying clouds, the chieftain leading this expedition enters the deployment galley to give final instructions to those under his command.

Clearing his voice, the room falls silent and he says,

“Today we continue our research of the inhabitants of planet Earth. Our leadership would like to learn more about their belief system, the why behind what these creatures say and do. In particular, we are interested in a religious group known as Christians.

They claim to be followers of a man named Jesus the Christ who lived over 2000 earth years ago. We would like you to bring some of these Christians back to our ship, unharmed, of course, so that we may question them.”

A small green hand goes up in the back of the room.

“Sir, how do we identify these followers of the man named Jesus from the rest of the population? Do they have any identifying marks, an extra arm, a blue tint to their skin?”

“No, unfortunately not. Our information is rather sketchy, hence the need for more research. But there are a few distinguishing factors you can look for among these humans.

According to their calendar, today is Sunday which means that you may find some Christians in buildings that they call churches. Some of them are known to wear a necklace, a piece of jewelry around their necks, that has on it a cross, a symbol of how the man Jesus died. At their sporting events, the participants after making a “good” play may do some kind of crossing motion over their chest

or they may point up at the sky with the second digit on their hand.”

“Why would they do that?” a voice calls out from the back of the room.

“We’re not really sure but that’s what some of them do.”

“Also some of these followers of Jesus suffer from a curious, medical condition that still has our scientists baffled. Often before they intake nutrients into their bodies, they suddenly will bow their heads down, close their eyes and fall asleep for a brief interval. Sometimes one or more of them even talk in their sleep. Then they all awake at the same time and commence eating. These Christians could possibly be metabolically inferior to the other humans. Anyway, be on the lookout for all these signs and behaviors. Good luck with your mission and bring us some Christians. Now off you go.”

What does it mean for you and me to be followers of Jesus? If little green aliens snatched you up as you exited the nave today or caught you “napping” before eating lunch and took you in for interrogation, how would you explain yourself / your life as a Christian? What proof could you give them that you are a follower of Christ?

Many of us might start by espousing what we believe. In one form or another we would say that we were created by God, that Jesus saved us by dying on the cross and rising from the dead, that in Baptism God has claimed us as beloved children and that now nothing can separate us from God’s love, not even death. We belong to Jesus and will live with him forever. This is most certainly true. This is what we believe as followers of Jesus but it does not paint for us a picture of exactly what it looks like to follow Jesus.

In describing what it is to follow Jesus some may find it easier to illustrate what it is not. Our reading from Galatians gives us such a list. Following Jesus does not involve fornication, impurity, quarrels, envy, drunkenness, carousing and on and on.

I doubt we would have much disagreement in naming these behaviors that are not a part of a faith life.

We know that that is not how Jesus would want us to live.

But does this mean that as long as we don't do the things on this list than we are faithfully following our Lord?

Jesus sets the bar pretty high for all of us in the gospel lesson today.

Jesus should be the most important thing, the most important person to us. Jesus should be the center of our lives, the center of everything we do. And Jesus goes to some extremes to make his point.

The guy who asks to go bury his father first is told to follow him instead and let the dead bury the dead. The person who simply wants to tell the folks at home goodbye is told to not look back but to follow him.

Is Jesus saying that family and home and personal responsibilities are not important? Of course, he isn't. We know that it is a part of God's law and desire for us to honor our parents, be good stewards of what we have been given, and take care of those under our roof. These are good things. These are godly things to do.

But Jesus warns us very strongly here that if we put our children, our spouse, our home life, our work, any of these good things as more important to us than him then we are not completely following our Lord.

I would come to worship on Sunday but after my hard week Sunday is the only day I have to rest. I would help with that ministry but I've already been there and done that. I've given my time.

Let some of the younger people do it. I'd like to come to bible study or learn about prayer but my life is too hectic right now.

Maybe when I retire or the kids are older or when life settles down more, I can.

We all have good intentions. Even I have some good excuses / good justification for what I do or do not do.

However, instead of good intentions, what you and I need

are ways to intentionally live to put Jesus first in our lives.

What we need is a roadmap to show us how to intentionally live as disciples of Jesus.

Michael Foss in his book, Power Surge, lists six marks of discipleship, six things that a disciple of Jesus does as they follow him.

- 1) pray daily
- 2) worship weekly
- 3) read the Bible regularly
- 4) serve in & beyond our congregation
- 5) form spiritual friendships
- 6) give generously of your time, talents and resources.

How many of these do you and I do? How can I expect to follow Jesus and be one of his disciples if I don't spend any time with him?

As a disciple of Jesus as I grow more connected to him, you should start to see evidence of that here on my daily schedule.

You could argue that I'm a pastor so of course there's going to be a lot of church stuff here. You're right...there is.

But besides my job, am I spending quiet time each day to connect with God and to pray for others?

Am I reading the word and chewing on it and letting God speak to me and shape me? Do I get together with my friends and pray, share our faith journeys, and support one another?

For my own sake and my friends and for this congregation as a disciple of Jesus I have to do this.

I can't keep on my feet without it.

We all need these six things. We desperately need to practice these six marks of discipleship because they connect us to Jesus and help us place him first in our lives. Jesus is always here for us.

He is always here loving us, caring for us, protecting us from harm.

But the problem is that even as close as he is, we are rarely available to him. By doing these things,

Jesus has a better chance of catching our eye, of getting hold of our ear, and letting his Spirit guide us through life.

The more we let him in, the more the Holy Spirit

can transform us to be more like our Lord.

People will begin to see Jesus in us for they will see in us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The Spirit works slowly in our lives, step by step molding us. And eventually our connection to Jesus infiltrates every aspect of our lives, every choice we make.

Truly following Jesus will change how you drive in rush hour traffic. It can change the way you interact with the cashier at the grocery store. It will make you think and wrestle over your next car purchase. It will change the way you talk with your children. It will make you question how much you spend on yourself and how little you give away to others. It will make you evaluate how you spend your time.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus is not something you can do on your own. You need Jesus with you and others slogging along beside you, picking you up when you've fallen, encouraging you and learning and growing together. This is the reason I am so excited about Good Shepherd starting ChristCare small groups. In these groups you all will help each other intentionally live out these six marks of discipleship. In ChristCare you will develop an even deeper relationship with Jesus and with the others in your group. Together you will learn to follow Jesus. And there is nothing, absolutely nothing, more important than that.

Jesus is calling us, one and all, to follow him and live as his disciples. He has rescued us from sin and death. He fills our lives with his goodness and grace. And Jesus sets us free to make our own choices, to place Jesus first in our lives or not. May the Holy Spirit guide us and open us to Jesus' love so that we will long to follow him.