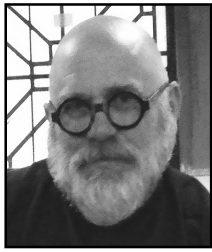


# ST BART'S



**A Sermon by:**

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## I Want to Follow Jesus

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 19, 2014*

*The Second Sunday After the Epiphany—Based on Isaiah 49:1-7 and John 1:29-42*

There have been a lot of conversations recently about the ways that Pope Francis' stylistic differences indicate a readiness to change the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. These conversations have occurred everywhere from water coolers and cocktail parties to the *New York Times*. These conversations are an attempt to answer the question: What could Pope Francis be thinking or intending by changing the way he lives and the way that business has been conducted at the Vatican? Some progressives hope for him to change dogma to allow many things that have not previously been allowed. Others hope that no matter what he changes about the way he lives and how he conducts the business of the church he will not change the dogma of the church. Skeptics inside and outside of the church say that unless he changes the dogma, the changes he makes will not last and will not matter.

I believe that these conversations miss the point. The point of the Christian life is freedom, not the dogma. Dogma has been defined as "a principle or set of principles laid down by an authority as incontrovertibly true." Whether one is the Pope or a pauper, the challenge of the Christian life is to live the freedom of the faith of Jesus in such an authentic way that others become free themselves. That is what Jesus did, and living that way is what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Freedom from the way of sin comes through living the Gospel, not dogma.

In today's Gospel reading and throughout the Gospels there are stories of people following Jesus first; then he begins to teach them. Following comes first . . . teaching comes later. When the followers of John encounter Jesus, they are moved first not by his dogma, principles or rules but rather by their experience of the witness of John and their own experience of Jesus. They are drawn to follow him. Followers of Jesus have their lives transformed, and they begin living authentically; and their very lives encourage others to transform their lives. In the end, the faith of Jesus cannot be reduced to any principle or set of principles. Many of us who want to be the followers of Jesus make this mistake. We spend our lives trying to live according to the rules or principles we believe or have been told are true. And when this doesn't work we double down and try to convince others to adopt for themselves the same rules and principles that have not worked for us.

When Jesus walked the earth he lived in such an authentic way that others experienced the love of God so profoundly when they encountered him that they wanted the same thing he had. And when they asked Jesus what it was about, he invited them to follow him. And they did. And we still can.

One person who followed Jesus was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King followed Jesus so closely that they killed him for it, and we remember him as a saint. Now some might object to remembering Dr. King as a saint. They point out that no matter how inspiring King's words were and no matter how transformative his works, he should not be remembered as a saint. After all, he was only a man with all the limitations and faults of Everyman and Everywoman.

This point of view also misses the point. It is a claim that we become saints by following the rules and doing it better than others. This point of view turns saints into nothing more than celebrities. We create celebrities to be larger than life so that they can inspire us, but in the end they leave us disappointed or angry. For you see, there are two problems with celebrity. The first problem with celebrity is that we make celebrities larger than life, and we forget that they are human beings subject to the same foibles and failures that plague our lives. When they don't live up to the ideal we have created for them, we become disappointed, angry, and judgmental. The second problem with the phenomenon of celebrity is that we allow our idolization of the celebrity to turn us into fans. As fans we watch the spectacle of celebrities from the stands, appreciating their skill and talent, without

ever getting into the action of the game ourselves. We believe that they are so special that we give over the power we have to act to the celebrity when we become fans. It is no wonder that we become disappointed and angry when we discover that our celebrities—whether saints, bicycle legends, rock stars, or movie stars—do not live up to our ideals.

We become disappointed and angry because we have given up our power and participation, whether we realize it or not, and have received nothing in return. Instead of followers we have become fans. Followers of Jesus get into the game of life and live as authentically as Jesus lived. Fans of Jesus argue about which principles and which rules should be obeyed. Jesus does not need fans arguing about the rules of the game. He needs followers who speak the language of love and get into the game themselves.

In the passage from Luke assigned to be read when we remember The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesus describes the Christian life as a life of love, kindness, and mercy. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Do to others as you would have them do to you. Do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as God is merciful."

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke the language of love in spite of his human frailties. Dr. King said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

As we watch Pope Francis change the way he lives and the way the church does its business, let us not judge the changes dogmatically, because that will always miss the point. And God help us not to turn him into a celebrity that by his specialness somehow absolves us from the responsibility of our own specialness. Instead let us recognize a fellow follower of Jesus, and let us try to follow Jesus authentically in our own lives. For remember: Love, kindness, and mercy are not rules, principles, or precepts that can be followed. Instead they are ways of being. It is our choice to be in love or not. It is our choice to be kind or not. And it is our choice to be merciful or not. Let us choose love because as Dr. King said, "Hate is too great a burden to bear." If we choose love we will be proclaiming in our own authentic way—a way that invites others to join us—that we are free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we all are free at last.