

10/11/2015 - Pentecost 20

“Saintly Living: Following” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Amos 5:6-7,10-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

For the next six weeks or so until Advent, we will be looking at different aspects of Saintly Living. Each week will explore saintly living by the example of a person or people following their faith in powerful ways. This week we are exploring the aspect of “Following”.

On the Eastern front of the great push into Poland by the Nazis in the fall of 1942, Hans Scholl and Alexander Schmorell, friends and students together in Munich, witnessed the brutal torture and killing of over 300,000 Jews and Poles. The two young men were already full of doubt about the Nazis. Hans had been brought up in a devoutly Lutheran home by a liberal and skeptical father. Alexander was an Orthodox Christian and had a strong sense of personal dignity for all. All that collapsed on the Eastern front.

When they returned to school, Hans’ philosophy teacher, Kurt Huber, encouraged their growing resistance to the regime and the war. Sophie Scholl, Hans’ younger sister, became aware of what Hans and Alexander were up to, and along with a couple friends named Christoph Probst and Willi Graf, the five, with their advisor, formed The White Rose Society.

The White Rose Society sought to undermine the intellectual foundations of the Nazi regime by using the intellectual tradition of Germany against it. They produced pamphlets which were mass produced in secret locations using a mimeograph machine. Then, the students would go out into the city of Munich and distribute the pamphlets secretly. The movement quickly spread through Germany and into Austria. Secret supporters in different colleges would copy and distribute the pamphlets.

All the pamphlets sought to undermine and bring down the Nazi regime through passive resistance and sabotage.

Even though Hans and Sophie, in particular, were brought up in a liberal household, both of them served in the Hitler Youth, as was required of all German children. They rose to positions of leadership in those groups. They followed, at least tacitly, the higher order of the Nazi vision of a Third Reich which would rule the world - a cleansed and pure world, devoid of human imperfection.

Following movements, particularly political movements, is relatively easy if no one challenges the movement from the beginning. Democracies are especially prone to demagogues and tyrants because democracies rely on the accepted understanding that since the majority voted for whomsoever, we get what we want when that person who wins the vote steps into office.

When Hitler was elected in 1932, he had already made his vision for Germany’s future clear in speeches and in writings. Hitler was hypnotic in his ability to absorb a crowd to his will. He was spellbinding, in the truest sense of the word. People followed.

They followed Hitler as if he were the Pied Piper. And many of them already knew what he would do once he proclaimed himself Der Fuhrer, the Ruler of the Third Reich.

Amos' challenge to the Israelites is that they have sought to follow the wrong ideal, the wrong people, the wrong God. Up front, I want to be clear that I am in no way suggesting a direct analogy between the Jews of Germany and Poland and the Israelites of Amos' day and age. I only want to explore what it means to follow the wrong thing and the right thing.

In Amos' time, the people were following a way that deviated from the moral call of the Lord. Justice has been turned into wormwood. Righteousness has been brought to the ground and the poor have been trampled down. Bribes have been taken at the gates of the Holy City.

Amos calls the people to follow a higher order, a better life. *"Seek the Lord and live", he says. "Hate evil and love good and establish justice at the gate."*

Sophie and Hans, Willi and Alexander and the White Rose Society sought to call the German people to follow a higher order. They pointed out the glaring injustice of the Nazi regime and called attention to things the people already knew - that horrible injustices in the name of the German people were being committed to Jewish people, undesirables, and enemies. In the tradition of the founder of their faith, Jesus Christ, they spoke up for those who cannot, will not or are unable to speak for themselves.

The leaders of the White Rose had already been called to follow a higher order of living. Hans said of himself that because of what he had chosen to do, he was willing to die. He did not fear the outcome. He had separated himself from the delusion and false dream of the Nazi regime. Hans chose to live according to the higher understanding of his faith. So had Sophie, Alexander, Willi, Kurt and Christof.

Hebrews 4 says, *"Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow."* Like a well-trained butcher, who knows the space between joint and bone and marrow, between sinew and meat, and can carve away just what is needed, so also does God and Christ. The way we are following because of tradition, habit, culture, personal need or greed, is cut away from us when we willfully choose to follow the Lord.

This is what I think Jesus means when he says in Matthew 10, *"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. 36 And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. 37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."*

And this is what is happening with the rich man in our Gospel reading today. He is being divided from that which he holds closest to himself - his possessions. Whether out of habit, out of inheritance, out of greed, the rich man cannot let go of what he has

chosen to follow. Only one thing is required of the rich man to inherit eternal life, and that is to follow Jesus. Jesus says to him, *“Let go of this one thing, this one thing you have followed and devoted yourself to, then come, follow me.”* Jesus calls the rich man to follow a higher order, to allow the Lord to carve away that which he is most attached, to follow a way which leads to God and to fullness of life, now and in the future.

The rich man grieved and was shocked and went away. Maybe later, after reflection, he might have returned to follow Jesus. We don't know. But Jesus calls us to make a decision, a willful and clear decision, to follow him. Whatever it is for you and I, whatever that one thing is that we hold onto which keeps us from God - wealth, power, control of self and others, status - whatever it is, Jesus calls us to willfully release it. It is really the only way we can follow him.

The decision to follow is hard, really hard, because it means giving up that which we would rather not - choosing to give it away now with all of one's will. Just as hard would be to drive a camel through the eye of a needle. It is an act of will to passively resist the tyranny of the state. It is an act of will to resist the tyranny of spirit and world and habit. But resistance is what Jesus calls us to.

This can only be done by trusting God completely. For us, “for (we) mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Nor are we simply giving over personal autonomy and power to some giant, inchoate force; instead, we are being empowered and set free by *“a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses...”*, a high priest, *“who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin”* (Hebrews 4).

In our passive resistance to the tyranny of habit, culture, and mind which surrounds us, we actively choose to follow Christ. This allows God to divide from us that which keeps us from him. It can hurt to become last. It can hurt to lose all those things we treasure here. Remember, we are giving up what keeps us from following God and Christ; we are not giving up everything just for the sake of giving it up. What keeps you, us, from God? What makes you, me, like the rich man?

The value we place on that which keeps us from God is at the cost of our soul. In this world, sometimes we pay with our lives in that resistance.

On a winter's day in Munich, Sophie and Christof distributed a new pamphlet by emptying a suitcase full of the pamphlets all over the floor of Munich University between classes. Sophie noticed that a few pamphlets remained stuck to the bottom of the suitcase, so she ran back upstairs to throw them with the others. The janitor of the university saw her do this, and as a good citizen of the Fatherland, he did as he had been told for many years - *“If you see something, say something.”*

Sophie, Christoph and Hans were all arrested that day. Immediately, almost 20 other White Rose members were also arrested. Alexander Schmorell, the chief writer of the pamphlets, was imprisoned separately. On February 22, 1943, Sophie, Christoph and her brother Hans, all in their early 20s, were beheaded in a public execution. The Nazi court did not want to create a public scene and spectacle and so they spread out the

trials. 12 more were executed on April 19, 1943. Alexander Schmorell was executed on July 13, 1943.

The White Rose Society was an ecumenical group of students, all of whom were acting on the higher understanding of their faith. They chose to follow something greater than demagogues, political systems and the tyranny of the age. The Scholl siblings are memorialized throughout Munich because of their resistance and in memory of their actions on behalf of those who could no longer speak for themselves. In February of 2012, the Orthodox church canonized Alexander Schmorell as a saint.

"The White Rose is a radiant page in the annals of the 20th Century. The courage to swim against the stream of public opinion, even when doing so was equated with treason, and the conviction that death is not too great a price to pay for following the whisperings of the conscience," writes Chris Zimmerman in The White Rose: Its Legacy and Challenge.¹

When we consider Saintly Living in the ways of Christ, we are speaking of living deliberately and choosing to let go of those ideas, ways and things which would keep us from God. In that choice, in that moment of willful commitment to a better way, we not only seek our own freedom in Christ, we seek it for everyone. We choose to follow Christ in every way. The existential moment of choice for the rich man is between an act of personal dignity, a putting on of the person of Christ, which actually frees us and makes us into even more of a true individual, and an act of habit, an act of apathy, which allows the way things are to simply continue.

Following is hard. Like Sophie, Hans, Alexander and Kurt, it requires wilfully and deliberately dividing oneself from one's past, one's tradition, one's former way. Following requires choosing God's way. God seems like a highly skilled butcher sometimes, cutting away those things we can't let go of, in order to make us into the glorious, shining, beautiful creatures God intends us to be and Christ calls us to be. *"Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive the mercy and find grace to help in the time of need"* (Heb 4).

Amen.

¹ quote found at <http://www.raoulwallenberg.net/holocaust/articles-20/sophie-scholl-white-rose/>. accessed 10/10/2015