

Jesus said, “Come, follow me”

Andrew Root, in a book entitled, *Relationships Unfiltered: Help for Youth Workers, Volunteers, and Parents on Creating Authentic Relationships*, quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom some of you may know—the German theologian, who was executed by the Nazis right at the end of the Second World War. According to Andrew Root’s quotation of Bonhoeffer,

Bonhoeffer believed that all theology, ministry, and faith begins with the question, “*Who?*” Who are you? Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? Who is this one who heals? Who teaches with authority? Who is this?

So, all theology... begin with this question, “Who?”

In the same way, Bonhoeffer believed that the question, “*How?*” was the question of disobedience. How is God present in Jesus? How is Jesus divine and human? How do I have faith in Jesus? How can I be good? The problem with a *how* question is that even if you get a “right” answer, there’s no need to encounter the living person of Jesus Christ.

Well, that point made in this book, *Relationships Unfiltered...* has a lot to do with our passage today from Mark’s gospel, where the question, “How?” is very prominent. First of all, this person addresses Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Now, we don’t know fully the intentions of this individual. But it is not clear that the person seriously considered *who* this person was, but simply gave him an honorific title, and hoped thereby, perhaps, to get his attention—“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The “how” question, again.

[After pointing out that only God is “good”,] Jesus responds with the commandments, and he lists them out, including one that is not in the ten commandments—“You shall not defraud anyone”, which could be interpreted as “you shall not steal”. The person, replying to Jesus, says, “All these things I have kept from my youth.”

Now, all this appears on the level of “how”—“how do I inherit eternal life”. But Jesus, essentially, calls on the person to see that any commandments that are addressed to human beings are not simply something recorded in a book, elsewhere. They are also something that addresses us in the present time, from the Holy One himself, from God. And Jesus’ life was a life of obedience to that command—not just the Ten Commandments, but the Ten Commandments understood in the fullest sense—that was his life. And so, even listing the commandments was a challenge to the person to recognize, “who is this that makes these commandments”, “who is the authority behind the commandments?”, and “who is the one who commands now?” even in the person of Jesus.

Jesus does have a further command; and that command is particularly addressed to this individual, at that time—a command that has the very authority of God, and brings up the question, “*Who?*” “Who are you that you would make such a command, address such a command to me—“Sell all you have, give the proceeds to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me.”

Again, the person could have asked, “Well, why should I follow you?” or “Who are you that I should follow me?” The person, by his response, indicated that he was still stuck in the notion that he was the one who was ultimately in control; he was the one who was finding a

recipe for entering the kingdom of God. He wasn't ready to hand over his life to one who said, "Come, follow me."

So, in this dialogue, we see this confrontation between "How?" and "Who?"—and there is a world of difference between the two.

Now, this issue continues in the passage, because Jesus remarks how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. It's like a camel trying to go through the eye of a needle. The disciples wonder—well—"How can anyone be saved?" The answer of Jesus is, "With human beings, it is impossible, but with God—"Who?"—all things are possible, on the basis of what God can do. All things are possible.

Right at the end of the passage, Peter remarks how the disciples have left everything to follow Jesus. And Jesus replies that they have indeed left things behind; but they will find "mothers, and brothers and sisters, and fields, and the like." And why should they find these things? Is it because, being followers of Christ, they will automatically become super-wealthy, or become associated with a large number of people, as their immediate friends? Well, perhaps again, the question is "Who?" If our faith is in God—God who has revealed himself in Christ, then all our experiences of life are related to the world of God's creation; it all relates to the One who is Lord of all creation, and who has made his sovereignty known in the person of Christ. And so, we interpret our lives in terms of the One whom we meet in Jesus Christ, and who is Lord of all.

That, then, is a brief synopsis of the way we could look at the passage, in terms of "How?" versus "Who?"—"How?" being the way of disobedience, and "Who?" being the way of faith.

Now, Andrew Root, the author of *Relationships Unfiltered: Help for Youth Workers, Volunteers, and Parents on Creating Authentic Relationships*, tries to apply this understanding of "How?" and "Who?" to how we relate to other people, and, in his case, how we relate to young people, adolescents.

Let me give some of his negative examples. One day he was invited to the home of a fellow ministry-worker. He sat down for supper, and, almost immediately, his fellow worker left home. He was away for some forty-five minutes. Meanwhile, Andrew was left with this man's wife and children, eating supper. The conversation was a little bit awkward. Andrew wondered what had happened to this man. Well, apparently, some young people had shown up, and they wanted to "hang out" with him; and so, he left with those young people. And that's something he regularly did, at supper-time.

Andrew Root points out that part of relationship with others is being true to who we are, as human beings. We are not just items that can be dispensed in relationship others. We have an authentic identity ourselves, just as Jesus could not just be sloughed off as "Good teacher", but needed the really serious consideration of the one who met him. Likewise, we have an identity which sets certain barriers or certain boundaries, in our lives, in our relationships with others.

However, he gives a more striking example of something quite different; and this involved a young woman, who was beginning university. Just as she was beginning her first year of university, she received news from home. The news from home was that her parents were separating, and were seeking a divorce. In fact, both of them had been having extra-marital

affairs, leading up to this decision. When this young woman, “Jess”, heard this news, she was devastated. As a result of that, she took part in some activities, which were not her usual. For example, she went to a party. Jess started drinking, and didn’t stop for a number of hours. She did that for the next five weekends, and her grades began to plummet, of course. But Jess “woke up”, and decided that—well—this was not going to solve the problem. She met some new friends, friends who were committed to their Christian faith. At the beginning of her second year, Jess sat down with her roommate, who herself was living through the divorce of her parents, feeling that it was important to be with another person going through difficult times.

So Jess was living with a group of these people—fellow Christians.

As Jess approached the door of her apartment on this October Friday, she was oblivious to what was waiting inside. Walking in, she found all four of her roommates sitting quietly in the living room.

“What’s up?” Jess asked, both cheerful and curious.

“We need to talk,” one of them shot back.

“What is it?” Jess responded, mind racing to uncover what she could have done.

“We’ve been talking,” another roommate started, “and we don’t think you should room with us anymore.”

“Why?” Jess asked, visibly shocked.

“Because you’re a bad influence on us, Jess. You partied heavily, not too long ago, you don’t listen to Christian music, and, personally, you’re not helping us grow closer to Jesus. We all have been trying to grow in our faith, and you’re bringing us down. We thought that you rooming with us would be good for you, that we would be good witnesses. We thought we could be good Christian influences on you, but you’re jeopardizing our faith by being a bad influence on us.”

Apparently, that is a true story; but it is a composite story—based on Andrew Root’s experience with several young people. And, of course, the four roommates exhibit a certain inability to share the place—the spiritual and emotional place—of Jess, who is dealing with some very difficult realities in her life.

Jesus called upon the man to observe the commandments, and he also challenged the man to sell all that he had, and to give the proceeds to the poor, and he would have treasure in heaven; and to come, and follow him (i.e. Jesus). Jesus remarks, in another part of the gospels, “Inasmuch as we do something to the “least of these”—people who are hungry or needy, people who are going through difficulties, of one form or another—we do it to Jesus himself. So part of the way in which we can look beyond “*How?*” to “*Who?*” is—not only being true to ourselves—but also attempting to identify and share the place of our neighbour, because that is what Jesus himself called us to do.

It seems to be a difficult thing to accomplish, sometimes—being true to who you are, and also identifying with the situation of other persons, who are maybe going through a difficult time. And so, certainly, we need God’s Spirit of love. We are told, in the passage from Mark’s gospel, that Jesus looked at this man, who was addressing him, and “loved him”. And, surely, love, and God’s Spirit, who is the motivating power behind that love, is what enables us to see another

person for who they are—a sacred and special person in the eyes of God, who is also fragile, and can need our care.

Andrew Root tells of another circumstance; and this is the last example I'll give from his book. He tells of a young woman who was dating her boyfriend; and, one time, her boyfriend forced himself upon her. She went to a clinic; and she went to this clinic, accompanied, actually by a person who was involved with youth ministry. She went to the clinic; and it was determined that she was not pregnant. But what she did find was that she had contracted HIV. Here was a person with her during that time—obviously, a very difficult time. His presence with her was appreciated. The reality of her life was, nevertheless, honoured and valued.

And so, love and God's Spirit is the determining reality which enables us to be true to ourselves and another, and also be the means whereby we can put ourselves in the place of another person, and be a support to them in that place.

May our lives not be governed by "*How?*"—and other people just as the means to some "*How?*". But may our lives be governed by "*Who?*"—whom do we serve, who we are in relationship to God, and who others are, who are our neighbour, and call on us to be neighbours with them. May we followers of the One whom we identified as Lord, rather than having our lives revolve around ourselves, governed by the question, "*How?*" May our lives be governed by the reality of faith, rather than by disobedience.