

Are You a Fan or a Follower?
John 6:60-66 and Luke 9:18-27
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M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church

In 1955 Norman Rockwell captured a quintessential snapshot of American entrepreneurship with his pencil drawing of three children and a lemonade stand. Five cents a glass read the homemade sign, and we can only imagine that the iced-cold, fresh-squeezed lemonade was worth every penny. Perhaps sometime in your childhood you tried your hand at a lemonade stand. But, think about it—there are professional lemonade stands out there today. Some kid somewhere ended up going into the lemonade stand business full-time.

Probably at first she needed a little help. Mom or dad helps her set up a rickety little stand. Then there's lettering a sign and making the cold concoction. After that first successful day, she decides to try again. And again. And again. Maybe at some point she gets invited to take her lemonade stand to a middle-school soccer game. She ups her price. Pretty soon she's got a lot of invitations to offer lemonade at all kinds of events. She's getting really busy, taking her lemonade stand all over town. Sure, she's making a really nice profit now, but things are a lot busier, a lot more professional. It's taking up more time than she expected. She's got to make special orders on lemons, set up an Excel spreadsheet to keep track of expenses, and what started as a hobby has become a time consuming commitment.

At that moment, our little entrepreneur has to make a choice. Is this going to become a career or is it going to be a hobby? Is she going to hire a few employees to share the load or decide to hang up her lemon juicer? What will she choose? Some of you are thinking, "Maybe I should go into the lemonade stand business." Others are thinking, "What a great kid. My child doesn't even know what a spreadsheet is." Whatever you're thinking, you understand the moment. There is a moment for all of us when we have to make a decision. Whether it's woodworking or a sport, art or music, we reach a point where we have to decide, is this a hobby or a career? Is it for fun or something more? Am I trying this out or investing in it whole-heartedly? And, we may not think about it in this light, but this moment of truth also applies to relationships.

If you're married or have ever had a significant other, there was a time when in some form or other you had the DTR conversation—the Define the Relationship

talk. No, you probably didn't use those words, but there came a point when you had to know, is this person sitting across from me as invested as I am? Where is this relationship going? Is this a casual, just for fun thing or is there a deeper level of commitment? Defining the relationship is the crux of what this 5-week sermon series is about. We're going to explore what kind of relationship we're in with Jesus by asking one question: are you a fan or a follower?

Now, if you ask a group of people sitting in a church sanctuary whether they are followers of Jesus, the response is likely to be, "Duh...we're in *church*." But, in asking us whether we are fans or followers, I'm **not** asking whether you go to church. I'm also not asking:

- ❖ Whether your parents or grandparents were Christians
- ❖ Whether you grew up going to Vacation Bible School
- ❖ If you have been through confirmation
- ❖ If you can recite the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles Creed or pray the rosary
- ❖ If you understand—or use—phrases like "traveling mercies" or "sword drill"
- ❖ If you ever walked forward during a 12-minute version of "Just As I Am" (*You know who you are!*)

Let me be clear: I'm not disparaging any of those things. My point is that most of us are quick to say, "yes I'm a follower of Jesus" but I'm not sure we fully understand what we are saying. As Inigo Montoya from *The Princess Bride* says, "I do not think that means what you think it means."

Let's think about these two terms. The word "fan" is defined as "an enthusiastic admirer." We're all fans of different things. Many of us are sports fans. We have favorite teams. We attend or watch the games. We wear the jersey of our favorite player—or keep our keys on a team logo lanyard. We cheer, often loudly. We understand the concept of being a fan of sports.

The truth is that the church has the potential to very easily become a stadium full of fans of Jesus. Think about how much like fans we can be, if we're not paying attention to what we're doing: we gather, sit down in our seats and open our programs. We applaud at certain times, watch the paid professionals do their thing and then leave somehow thinking that, as fans, it was all done for us. We get in the car and evaluate the sermon and hymn selections, and we give the service a thumbs up or thumbs down. And, we really get into it. We know the cheers, er, I

mean, the songs by heart. We're really, really big fans, and being a fan feels really good because Jesus is awesome.

But here's the sobering thing—Jesus never cared one iota about having fans. Enthusiastic admirers were not important to him at all, and since he never cared about having fans, perhaps we ought to be very clear and honest with him—and with ourselves—and define the relationship. And, to do that, I want to ask three questions:

1. Why are you here? If you read the Gospels, at different points in his ministry Jesus would draw a line in the sand to separate the fans from his true followers. One such instance occurs in John 6. Jesus is at the height of his ministry with huge crowds following him everywhere. He is doing miracles and healing people, and 6:2 tells us that the people were following him “because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.” In other words, the main reason the crowds were showing up was because of the spectacle. They didn't care so much about the teaching or a life-changing relationship. They were there for the show and for what Jesus could do for them.

So, why are *you* here? What is your “because?” Is it because you really enjoy the music? Or you love the diversity of the people? Or, because it gives you a place to belong? Or because of the great spread at coffee hour? There's nothing wrong with any of these things, but eventually Jesus challenges fans to a deeper, more intimate relationship with him, and in verse 66, here is what happens when he does that: “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”

A lot of them went home because Jesus says, “Let's define what we've got here,” and what he offered wasn't what many of them wanted. At some point it can't be about the show or the people. Jesus wants to have a profoundly meaningful relationship with you. That's why he calls us here.

Several years ago, one of my colleagues in this presbytery did an exercise with his church around this very question. He asked members of his congregation to articulate why they were Christians. It was an enlightening experience. His congregants really struggled to name in concrete terms why they were people of faith. Their faith was real and significant to them, but they had never actually stopped to put it into words. It's an exercise that is important for all of us to do. If you had 60 seconds to tell someone why it is important to be a Christian, what would you say?

2. The second question is: **Are you all in?** Being a follower of Jesus requires complete commitment. A true disciple of Jesus will do whatever it takes to follow him. The truth is, we don't do all that well with absolute commitment, do we? We prefer selective commitment. We would rather customize Christianity, picking and choosing the areas in which we will give our loyalty and obedience. We do it when we say, "I'm a follower of Jesus, sure, but don't ask me to forgive the person who betrayed me. I'm not going to let go of that resentment. I have every reason to be bitter." Or, "I'll follow Jesus but take your hand off my wallet! Don't talk to me about money because I work hard for that money, and it's mine to do with as I please." Customized Christianity always lets us follow Jesus only in the areas that are comfortable to us, only in the areas we agree with. That's an option for fans but not for followers.

3. **Have you made it your own?** Many of us started going to church because of a parent. In fact, growing up you were made to go to church. Some of us started going because of a friend or a dating partner or a spouse. You come because they like it when you attend. You come because it appeases them. These can be wonderful ways to be introduced to faith and to the person of Jesus Christ, but at some point, you have to make your faith your own. Mom, dad, spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend—no one else can have a relationship with Jesus for you. It's the difference between knowing all about the 25 men who make up the Washington Nationals roster versus actually being on the team. As a spectator, I can read the box scores after every game. I can follow the news on all the players, know their individual stats, and yell and cheer, but nothing is actually required of me because I'm not on the field. I'm not the one with the ball and the bat in my hand. I don't have to sacrifice anything to be a fan. The players, meanwhile, show up early and stay late. They play through injuries, work out in the weight room, and leave it all out on the field every night. I sit in the stands or watch it at home on TV and never even break a sweat.

I want to say this as clearly as I can: the biggest threat to Christianity today is not a secular culture that seeks to marginalize us. It's churches that have become stadiums for fans rather than incubators for followers. It's legions of Christians sitting in the bleachers rather than being down on the playing field. It's masses of fans who have no real interest in following Christ. They want to be close enough to Jesus to get all the benefits but not so close that it requires anything of them.

I probably don't have to tell you that fans don't win the World Series or the Super Bowl. Fans don't get their hands dirty. And fans sure don't change the world which is why we're called to be followers, not fans. Amen.