

**FOLLOWING JESUS**  
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March 8, 2009  
Second Sunday in Lent  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Years ago I read a book by Latin American priest Jon Sobrino. One line from the book has stuck with me. "It's one thing to say you believe in Christ; it's something else to follow Jesus."

No one has to follow Jesus. It's not a matter of gaining heaven or avoiding hell after death. It's simply a matter of how we choose to live here and now. If we choose to follow Jesus, it will cost us something but abundant life comes with it, too.

**Mark 8:31-38**

Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected, killed, and after three days rise again. He said this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?"

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Blood stained floorboards lie under this carpet. They were soaked with the blood of young men mortally wounded in the battle of Antietam in 1862. I don't know for sure, but I'm guessing that some of the wounded died in this sanctuary. Deaths like that render a place holy.

As far as I know, no one else died in this church until March 4, 2003. That was the day Martin Burr died here. It was the eve of Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent.

Martin was a homeless man deeply wounded in more ways than one. He found a respite in this church during that exceptionally harsh and cold winter when snow just kept falling.

Martin had been sleeping in his car for a week or so before it got really cold. He came in here to get warm.

I remember noticing his name in the visitor's book in the Narthex day after day, sometimes several times a day. *Martin Burr. Martin Burr. Martin Burr.* Then one day I saw a small man bundled in a gray parka sitting alone in a pew.

I'm Martin Burr, he said.

So you're *the* "Martin Burr" who signs in several times every day, I said?!

That's me, he said with a sheepish grin. I want God to know I've been here. And besides, it's warm here. I hope you don't mind if I come in to get warm and to pray once in awhile.

One morning I found Martin kneeling at the Lord's Table. He asked if I would teach him to pray.

OK, I said. Let's sit here on the front pew. You talk to God and I'll be a witness.

He bowed his head and said: *God, Martin here. I'd like a place to live, I'd like a job, and I want to quit smoking. That's it for now.*

And I said, "Amen."

I'm not sure how God deals with a zillion requests of that sort. But I can tell you this, soon after Bob Proudman, an Elder of this church, took Martin under his wing. For the next month or so Bob assisted Martin in seeking medical care, housing, and employment.

We couldn't help but notice how meticulously clean and polite Martin was. We found a warm room and a shower for him—some days in the church basement. Out of gratitude, Martin shoveled our walks day after day after day.

Several times he drove bushel baskets of donated food to Jefferson County Community Ministries in Charles Town. Some of you remember how he often stood by the lower doors and opened them for anyone coming in or going out.

That January our Women's Circle invited Martin to join them for soup in the Fellowship Hall. Our weekly Wednesday morning prayer group of Eunsook Baihly, Melinda Landolt, Loretta Krogstad and others, befriended him. Warm meals would end up in his hands. As it turned out, it was that Wednesday morning prayer group that found his body just after sun-up on Ash Wednesday.

A couple weeks or so before his death, Martin told several people in our parish that this was the first time and first place he had ever been accepted and loved, treated like a human being. Later, he put that in a hand written note. He would often say with complete seriousness that to be "the doorkeeper in the house of the Lord" was the greatest job he ever had.

If this son of man named Martin—abandoned by his mother, called runt and half breed by school children, beaten and betrayed by his family—if this man wanted to be found by people who loved him, he died in the right place at the right time. The devil had a grip on Martin. But he died in the arms of angels.

After his death our elders and deacons talked, studied, and prayed long and hard about what we did and didn't do, and how we might have done it differently that fateful winter. We asked ourselves questions about tough love and mushy sentiment, about compassionate wisdom and wise compassion, about naiveté, foolishness, calculated risks, stupid risks, and what it all has to do with *following Jesus* in a complicated world of poverty, injustice, mental illness, guns, and insurance policies.

The truth is: we had put ourselves, our children, and others at great risk. And yet at the time, with no previous experience of this sort, many of us believed we were simply following Jesus. After all we are a church not a business or government agency. Love calculates differently.

Apparently, you can't walk with Jesus, you can't talk with Jesus, and you sure can't eat with Jesus without taking risks now and then. Following Jesus takes heart and mind. Both. And it won't do to leave one or the other behind.

In the wake of Martin's death, the Session adopted a policy: if anyone comes to our attention needing shelter and food we would not house them in the church building. Rather we would refer or take them immediately to agencies such as the Rescue Mission because such agencies have greater experience and resources for assisting such persons.

Nevertheless, thanks in part to the continuing presence of Martin's spirit, we are not the same congregation we were six years ago. Six years ago we took in a stranger who left

us full of wonder. Much to our surprise, in the wake of Martin's death, something was begotten in us—a congregation far more generous than it ever was before in bringing food for local food pantries and clothing and shoes for the Rescue Mission in order to benefit the hungry, the cold and the homeless. We can't gather here at this communion table without remembering Jesus or Martin.

I don't know for sure but I'm guessing someone is standing just outside your own world bundled against the cold in one way or another. And there you are, a follower of Jesus, wondering what you might do.

Here is Martin's hand written note. *This is the first time that I have been treated as if I were a human being! God bless each and every one of you in this house of Jesus and his family!*

Signed: *Your friend Marty*