

Following Jesus: Finding Our Way Home in an Age of Anxiety

Introduction and Chapter 1

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord Father, we want to be ever closer to you. Help us to be at home with you. In Christ's holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Henri Nouwen Bio (1932-1996)**

- 1957 - Ordained Catholic Priest; Went on to study psychology instead of theology
 - Wanted to study the human side of faith (person-focused not scientifically-focused)
- Taught at several colleges including Notre Dame and Yale
- Later in his career, worked with those with intellectual disabilities
- Published 39 books
- Open to close friends about being a gay man but was also believed to be celibate
- *Following Jesus* is a posthumous publication compiled from a series of Nouwen's Lenten lectures in 1985

- **Foreward (by Richard Rohr)**

- Rohr describes his primary gift as "human vulnerability and the healing power he gained from rugged honesty"
- Rohr explains Nouwen's understanding of sin as the "human shadow" and invited it willingly into the entire conversation of spirituality
 - Why do you think he referred to it as the human shadow?
- [9] He confessed his sins and failures, "but only after he first felt their sting, their texture, their truth, and their always available wisdom"
 - Is this the way you relate to sin?
 - Did the imagery of holding sin as a means for learning resonate or surprise you?
 - How would the Christian faith look if we all spent this much time sitting with our shadow's sting, texture, truth, and wisdom?

- **Introduction**

- [11] "Often we are more wanderers than followers. <continuing reading until the end of the paragraph>"
 - Was there anything here that resonated with you... things that struck true... provoked deeper meaning behind his words?
- [12] God sent the Voice of Love [Jesus] into this world with the intention to say "Follow me" and in doing so gave us focus/direction, *but* God's voice is a sensitive one
 - doesn't push or pull
 - Read 1 Kings 19:11-13 (NIV or The Message)
 - [14] "Listen. It says, 'I love you,' and calls you by name. It says 'Come, come, follow me.'
 - Can you recall a time when you were wandering and heard the voice of love call to you to follow or a time when you were looking for God's voice in the wind and fire and earthquake and missed his still small voice?

- **Chapter 1 – The Invitation**

- Read John 1:35-39 (from book)

- Why do you think the disciples asked “Where do you live?” instead of “We want to follow you” or “Take away our sins”?
- [20] “God wants to be our room, our house. He wants to be anything that makes us feel at home. She is like a bird hugging us under her wings. She is like a woman holding us in her womb. She is Infinite Mother, Loving Host, Caring Father, the Good Provider who invites us to join him.”
 - Why do you think Nouwen uses these images?
- Listen
 - Nouwen stresses that we must listen to those who point to Jesus (e.g., Samuel, Elizabeth, John the Baptist, John, Andrew, and the woman at the well)
 - Do you have examples of such people in your life?
- Ask
 - John 15:15 – “I no longer call you servants, I call you friends.”
 - What is the significance of this passage to you?
- Dwell
 - What images come to mind when you think of dwelling?
 - Is it a positive or negative connotation?
- Other reflections?

References for material:

- *[Following Jesus: Finding Our Way Home in an Age of Anxiety](#)*
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Italics imply important points or example answers the leader can convey

Chapter 2

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord Jesus, help us to hear and heed your call to follow you – without hesitation. In Your Name we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 2 – The Call**

- [33] Have volunteer read Luke 5:1-11 (from book)
 - [34] “The part of us that is weak, broken, or poor becomes the place where something new can begin.”
 - What do you think Nouwen means?
 - Why do you think Jesus asked the disciples to get back in their boat and cast their nets? *Jesus is trying to make a concrete tangible move from the old way of thinking (normal logic) to the new way of thinking (illogic of God)*
 - Can you think of a time when you responded to God with normal logic?
 - Can you think of a Bible story where people responded with normal logic? *Moses, Loaves&Fish, Tomb*
 - Can you give examples where we miss God’s message altogether because of our focus on human logic? *capitalism, gun violence/gun control, mental health, human sexuality, addressing the poor/marginalized*
- We Are Called
 - [39] How does Nouwen’s portrayal of our “scarcity mentality” resonate with you?
 - Why do you think it is so hard for us to “leave our nets and follow Jesus”?
 - [41] Why would we rather have the fear we know than the love we don’t?
- How Do We Respond?
 - [43] “The great secret of the spiritual life is that you already know the little steps, even if you don’t know the big ones.”
 - Do you see yourself getting hung up on the big questions rather than recognizing the small answers you already know?
- Following Jesus
 - [46] “Following does not mean imitating or copying someone’s behavior... If we imitate someone we are not developing a personal, intimate relationship with that person.”
 - How would you describe the difference between imitating and following?
- [49] “God’s love is so rich and broad that it takes many people to make it visible.”
 - In rapid-fire/brainstorm fashion, have everyone call out examples of different ways people make God’s love visible
- Other reflections?

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Chapter 3

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord God, you tell us to love our enemies, but it's so hard. Help us to see everyone, including those we view as enemies, as your child. Help us to love them just as you love us, in spite of our faults. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 3 – The Challenge**

- Over the course of your life, whom have you branded as “enemies”?
- Read Luke 6:27-36
 - What's the hardest part of this message?
 - What's the easiest part of this message?
- [52] “‘Love your enemies’...touches precisely that place where the New Testament is really new.”
 - Compare to Proverbs 25:21-22
 - How do these passages differ?
- Nouwen discusses humans as being especially “needy” of affirmation and praise
 - To what extent do you find yourself needy?
- The wound of a needy person is “rejection” – the feeling that they're not truly loved
 - When have you experienced the wound of rejection?
- [55] “The first love says, ‘I loved you before you could love anyone or before you could receive love from anyone.’”
 - Like Wesley's prevenient grace, this is prevenient love.
 - Is it possible for humans to mimic this original love by God?
- [56] “Worldly love is transactional”
 - Can you give examples of such transactions?
- [59] In the “Love of Friends” section, Nouwen emphasizes that deep love results in God's presence being made visible through the relationship
 - In what ways has God been made visible in your relationships?
- [64] In what ways is your identity dependent on having enemies?
- How important is it to you that God has no enemies?
- What experience do you have with praying for your enemies?
- [70] “To follow Jesus means that we do the walking... Following Jesus means to live our life in companionship with the One who understands us fully.”
 - How does viewing Jesus as a companion rather than a problem solver impact your life?
- Other reflections?

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Chapter 4

- **Opening Prayer** (consider using as a Closing Prayer instead)
 - [83] “Let my woundedness become part of your woundedness so that my woundedness does not make me bitter or resentful, angry or upset, but brings me in touch with the mystery of your death and resurrection. I bring into your presence my whole being. I bring to you all my anguish and pain. Let my cross merge with yours. My burden becomes your burden and the experience fills me with new life and new hope.”
- **Chapter 4 – The Cost**
 - Read Matthew 11:28-30
 - In what ways do you consider Jesus’ burden easy?
 - In what ways is it hard for you?
 - [74] What do you think of Nouwen’s reflection that God came as Jesus because He “wanted to live our life to the full extent of what that means”?
 - What comfort can you draw from the concept of God having experienced first-hand all our types of suffering, including loneliness, anger, pain, and rejection?
 - *Compassion comes from the Latin: com=“with” & passio = “to suffer”*
 - *This is why Jesus’ final days are referred to as “The Passion”*
 - *Jesus’ compassion is not just sympathy, but empathy*
 - Give examples of when you have felt empathy vs. sympathy
 - What are your current coping strategies with the news?
 - [77] *“Sometimes the only way to survive is to become numb and say, ‘I can’t pay attention to all that. It is too much. It is beyond my control. I’ve got my own problems.’”*
 - [78] Give an example of when you’ve let a small thing become a heavy burden because “they occupy us and take a place in our heart.”
 - “that is when we feel disconnected from God. A burden becomes a heavy burden when it doesn’t feel connected to anything else.”
 - When have you felt a burden lightened when you realized you didn’t have to carry it yourself?
 - Nouwen proposes that Jesus asks us to take up his cross in order to connect our burdens with God’s burden, rather than simply taking on our burden
 - How do you feel about this?
 - Does it help to put your suffering in the context of Jesus’ suffering?
 - [86] “Many of us, if we are following Jesus at all, follow out of fear.”
 - Has this been, or is it still true for you to any extent?
 - Read John 21:18
 - [87] What do you think of Nouwen’s assertion that Jesus means “When you are in love, when you are really in love, you can be guided to places that you have not chosen yourself. The person who loves can go to places where she or he would rather not go.”
 - Other reflections?

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Chapter 5

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, thank you for the joy your Son brought to the world, and help us to live our lives with this gift ever-present in our hearts. In Christ's holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 5 – The Reward**

- How would you describe “joy”?
- [91] “The reward of following Jesus is joy.”
 - Do you view this joy as a reward, or something else?
- Nouwen notes that in most towns and cities, people appear very serious.
 - In what settings have you noticed people being serious?
 - In what settings have you noticed people being joyful?
- Do you agree that seriousness has to do with accomplishment, and that serious people are typically “rather well off”?
- [94] “Let’s not be so serious as though we are the only ones able to save the world. Only God saves the world.”
 - In what ways are you guilty of this?
- Why do you think it is harder to put your joy into words, as opposed to your pain and suffering?
- Nouwen uses “ecstasy” to talk about joy. To move out of (“ec”) a static place.
 - Give examples when you found joy by moving to something new
- [96] “Some of us prefer to be secure and a little miserable rather than insecure and vitalized.”
 - Do you fall into this camp? Why?
- [100] Nouwen doesn’t think Jesus was ever funny, but he was full of joy.
 - Do you think Jesus had a sense of humor?
 - Why don’t we see it in the Gospels?
- Do you think our modern culture is conditioned to chase happiness as opposed to joy?
- Have you witnessed joy in people who are suffering or dying?
- [108] In what ways do you find yourself following the Jesus of two thousand years ago rather than the Jesus who is alive with you today?
- Other reflections?

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Chapter 6

- **Opening Prayer**

[126] Dear God, I love you. I love you. I know you love me and I love you. I don't have any big things to say. I don't have any profound words to express, but I am here and I want you to be with me and I want to be with you. Amen.

- **Chapter 6 – The Promise**

- John 14:17 [*not* John 16:7-15 as cited in the book] – “even the Spirit of truth, whom the world can never receive since it neither sees nor knows him”
 - What does it mean to *receive* the Spirit?
 - What does it mean to you that God “dwells in you”?
- Nouwen asserts that we grow closer to one another not just by presence, but also by absence/leaving, and that Jesus’ leaving did just that. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” has its origins in an old Roman poet, Sextus Propertius. Charles Schultz later extended it by saying “Absence makes the *heart* grow fonder, but it sure makes *the rest of you* lonely.”
 - In what ways have you grown closer to another through absence?
- [117] “Presence in absence”
 - *Memories of conversations can be as powerful as the visits themselves*
 - *You can say things in writing that you can't face-to-face*
 - *Death of those we love*
 - Can you provide examples of any of the above?
- [121] “Jesus had to leave for us to understand who Jesus truly was.” It made room for the Spirit.
 - This was important for his disciples.
 - How is Jesus leaving important to you?
- [122] “For us the future is often a source of anxiety and fear.”
 - To what extent is this true for you?
 - What worries do you tend to hold on to?
 - What techniques do you use to follow Jesus’ advice: “...do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” [Matthew 6:34]
- [127] “we are never totally here [in the present]. If we were totally here we would be in heaven so we are never totally here. We are a little bit in the past, a little bit in the future, and all over the place, actually.”
 - What percentage of your time is totally here?
 - What percentage is thinking about the past?
 - ...the future?
- [129] Service should be predicated on gratitude for the love we’ve received rather than change we want to institute.
 - Give examples where you’ve seen change being a condition of service. *Traditional mission trips, work requirements for Medicaid*
 - Give examples where you’ve seen service stemming from gratitude.
- Other reflections?

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