

**Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 8, 2008**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

The psychologist in me has always wondered how Jesus did it. How did he gather his earliest disciples so effortlessly? Today's gospel is a perfect illustration. Jesus is just walking down the street, he passes a local tax booth, and says to the man sitting there: follow me! And the man, Matthew, gets up and follows him. It's that simple. Period!

Was Matthew just bored with his job as a tax collector? Was he, perhaps, bored with his whole life? He probably had a wife and family at home. What about them? How does one just pick-up and walk away from one's life? And why would one want to do it?

The same thing happens to many of the other disciples too. Think of Peter and Andrew, James and John, and the others. They all seem to just walk away from their lives to follow this Jesus. Why? Was Jesus that attractive to them? What was it exactly he offered them?

While I do not have a simple answer to these questions (no one really does), learning more about this complex psychology could be very interesting, and instructive for you and me. We too are invited to follow him; we too have complex lives that defy easy resolution. Even though I bet there are some

days you would love to just walk away from your present life, you are not about to do it. Are you? Is there any one whom you would follow so quickly and so completely? Who might that person be? And why would you follow?

Granted that we usually think that Matthew and his friends had a distinct advantage over us; they encountered the real, living, breathing, fleshy Jesus of Nazareth. But do you think that was enough to make them follow so quickly? Could Jesus have been that attractive in the flesh? I doubt it. He probably looked like any other person of Jewish ancestry at his time.

I “Googled” what Jesus looked like and got 3,930,000 hits. One of the most intriguing and surprising was a cover story from December 2002 in, of all places, *Popular Mechanics*. Go figure!

Some of you may also remember in the year 2000, the *National Catholic Reporter* sponsored an art contest to draw what Jesus really looked like. They had over 1,600 entries from over 1000 artists in nineteen countries. The “winner” was called “Jesus of the People.” It portrayed a swarthy, if not black, man whose image was based on a female model. And looked very sad and intense at the same time. Very politically correct for the times!

For their trouble, the *NCR* got this response from one critic: “Where do you get off putting a black Jesus on the cover of your God deprived

magazine.” And from many others, just this sentiment: “Don’t mess with my Jesus!” We all seem to have our own images of what he must have looked like. But would his looks alone account for his uncanny ability to gather folks to himself. I doubt that too.

But Jesus does seem to have had an uncanny ability to instantly tap into other people’s hopes and wishes and dreams. I think it might have been that ability that Jesus was able to communicate instantaneously to those whom he encountered.

Jesus seems to have let people glimpse in an instant what they could become, who they really were already, and where they had really come from. He cuts across all the distinctions and fears of cherished religions (including his own faith tradition); he invites everyone into the party (including the strangest, the slowest, and even those we might call, the sleaziest); he displays no regard for class, age, gender, political affiliation, or any other pseudo-important distinction. Somehow Jesus instinctively and instantaneously seems to communicate the entire Promise of his God.

Jesus’ “aura” (or whatever) speaks wordlessly what St. Paul says today. Remember Abraham: a 100 year old man with a barren wife who finds himself exhausted and disillusioned by life. And yet who still hears, however

faintly, a Promise made to him and his descendants. He does not waver, Paul tells us; he follows.

And Jesus seems to incarnate in an instant the legacy of the great prophets of Israel. The Hosea who says today: “I only desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” Jesus’ whole life says: there are no hoops to jump through to know God. Just come, and follow me!

I wonder if that is the message that captures Matthew and the others. Maybe they could see in the passing of this strange man from Nazareth all that they ever dreamed could be in their own lives: the freedom, the hope, the love. Maybe they could glimpse that invitation in Jesus. And they heard an invitation to become more truly themselves than they had ever thought possible. Now that might be enough to explain the strange psychology behind just walking away so easily.

Helen Keller once said: “One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar.” Maybe Matthew felt that impulse, that invitation to soar. The question remains: Can we?

Matthew and the others allowed themselves to be seized by a promise of freedom, and finally by a promise of love. Following Jesus must have seemed

so impractical; their whole lives were at stake after all. But somehow they sensed that nothing could be more practical than falling in love and being in love. (Sounds reminiscent of the Jesuits' beloved former General, Fr. Pedro Arrupe.) That's finally what Jesus offered them: complete, unconditional, acceptance and love. The righteous need not apply; but sinners are always welcome. You need not even be healthy (in mind, body, or spirit); we are all ill somehow.

Jesus is still alive, still has flesh and blood, still has a body (oddly enough—look around). And Jesus still says to you and me, as he once said to Matthew: Follow me. Forget about your burnt offerings to any false gods, and remember the true God's Promise: be free—fall in love, stay in love and it will decide everything.