

# JUST LENT: “The Driver’s Seat”

Romans 6:3-4 and Matthew 16:13-26

Covenant Presbyterian Church

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*<sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.*

Just yesterday, I read the words of Romans 6 with the family of Donald Nepstad. Don was a retired Presbyterian pastor who has called Covenant his home for several years and we gathered just outside the sanctuary, where Don’s ashes are now in the columbarium.

These words from Romans are often read at funerals and at baptisms, because Christian faith encompasses life and death, that faithful discipleship is a life and death matter. You’ll hear that same life and death urgency in the gospel reading today, where Jesus is teaching his disciples.

In this gospel reading about the identity of Jesus it is interesting to note that, as Peter affirms the identity of Jesus, Jesus responds by affirming Peter’s identity, the rock, the foundation of the church. The text seems to suggest that as we figure out who Jesus is, we figure out who we are, and we figure out what we’re supposed to do with this life that God has given us.

But Peter doesn’t have it all figured out. He can’t accept the idea of Jesus suffering, but as the life and death of Jesus show us, suffering is part of the story. And as we know from elsewhere in the Bible, Peter gradually got a clearer understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Listen for God’s word from Matthew 16.

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.*

*From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

*Then Jesus told his disciples, “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 will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?”*

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Are you a leader? Are you a follower?

If you don't feel of yourself as a leader, there are plenty of people who think you should. There are thousands and thousands of books on leadership in our world today. High school students feel pressured to take on leadership roles to look good for colleges. "Leadership" is a valued trait in most jobs.

But there aren't too many books or too people championing being a good follower.

And at the core of our Christian faith is the call to follow. Yes there is a role for Christian leadership, but all of us are called to follow.

Jesus said:

Come follow me, and I will make you fish for people.

Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.

In our culture today we "follow" celebrities, politicians, and athletes on social media. But Jesus is talking about more than being inspired to buy what a celebrity is promoting or enjoying a funny tweet or Facebook post.

There is a well-circulated image of Jesus, where he is speaking to a young man, saying "No, I'm not talking about Twitter. I really want you to follow me."

As Christians, we are called to follow Jesus. The one who proclaimed the Kingdom of God. The one who called his followers to love their neighbors and even their enemies. The one who warned people about the danger of wealth and possessions. The one who challenged the political and economic and religious powers of his day, and ended up dying on a cross.

Following Jesus doesn't simply mean we get a reserved a place in heaven. Jesus calls us to follow him, into new life. Jesus wanted people to follow him and live in a new way, with new priorities and new purposes.

Following Jesus means that you know you are called to live differently every day, with love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. Following Jesus means you wake up in the morning and before you get too caught up in the day, you say "God how can I serve your Kingdom today? How can I show your love today? How can I be a faithful follower of Jesus today?"

Following Jesus means also means you see the world differently. My colleague Hunter Farrell spent many years as a mission co-worker in Peru, and then several years leading Presbyterian World Mission, and he is now leading the World Mission Initiative at Pittsburgh Seminary.

I follow him on Facebook (yes I see the irony here) and he recently shared about an encounter he had with Gustavo Gutiérrez, author of the groundbreaking *A Theology of Liberation*. Gutiérrez is one of the most influential theologians of the past 50 years.

In response to a question that Hunter asked, Gutiérrez replied:

"If the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized were at the heart of Jesus' ministry, why aren't they at the heart of ours?"

Take up your cross, deny yourself, and come follow me, says Jesus.

In the paraphrase known as *The Message*, this verse sounds different:

[Jesus said] “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead.  
**You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am.**

We have an almost-16 year-old son who is learning to drive. And as anyone who has taught someone else to drive knows, it’s not easy giving up the wheel.

Letting your child take the driver’s seat is an exciting chapter in life; letting Jesus take the driver’s seat is the whole story. This is our calling.

And it’s hard to let Jesus take over, and to really be a faithful follower.

In our consumer culture, it’s easy to follow the path of more stuff.

In our indulgent culture, it’s easy to follow the messages telling us that we deserve every conceivable luxury.

In our attention deficit culture, it’s easy to get distracted by gossip, glitz, and nonsense.

Learning to follow Jesus and to really give our life over to God’s will takes patience and persistence, and encouragement from other people.

So we gather together. We baptize. We affirm our faith. We sing. We pray. We encourage each other. We share the meal. And we gradually learn to follow.

*Dear God, thank you for sending Jesus to call us to change directions. Give us the grace and courage to follow him and to serve your Kingdom. Amen.*