

# **“Follow the Leader”**

Mark 1:9-18 and 8:27-36

Sunday, February 18, 2018

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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On this first Sunday of Lent, we hear how, after his baptism, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted. And he came out of that time with a clear sense of purpose—proclaiming God’s Kingdom and calling people to follow him.

They followed Jesus, seeing his miracles and hearing his teachings. But after a while, they learned that being a follower of Jesus is not a spectator sport.

In the middle of the gospel, Jesus calls his disciples to a deeper level of commitment, with a more challenging call, than just fishing for people.

In Mark 8-10, there is a section on discipleship, and the section begins and closes with Jesus healing people who were blind, with the implication that followers of Jesus learn to see things in new ways.

Three times in this section, the same pattern happens:

Jesus speaks of his death

The disciples misunderstand

Jesus responds with a challenging teaching about discipleship

Our reading for today is the first of those three sections, from Mark 8. Listen for God’s word.

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days

rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He 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?

Jesus says that he must suffer and die. The words came as a surprise to the disciples. The text tells us Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him.

Other translations say Peter corrected him, or protested to him.

We don’t know exactly what Peter said. Maybe he said something like “Um Jesus, this suffering and death stuff—you’re not serious are you? Because you’re the Messiah, the leader, the new King. You are not supposed to die!”

Popular understanding was that the Messiah would be a political or military leader, taking charge of things. So when Jesus says that he had to suffer and die, Peter and the other disciples were certainly surprised, and probably a little angry, or disappointed, or maybe afraid.

Then making it abundantly clear, Jesus speaks to Peter and the rest that following him means taking up a cross, denying oneself, and losing one’s life in order to save it.

And being hung on a cross was a well-known form of painful death for those who challenged the Roman Empire. Not a pretty picture.

Take up your cross and follow. Lose your life in order to save it. These are strong words. Difficult words. But here they are at the center of the gospel. What are we to with them?

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In the past several years, we have had dozens of people join Covenant as new members. In that process they are often asked why they want to join, or what they like about Covenant. One word I have heard a lot is “comfortable.” People

like this church because it feels good and safe and kind and gracious—in a word, comfortable.

Church should be a place of comfort. Jesus proclaims forgiveness and offers healing and hope. He speaks of a peace that comes from God and he says “Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

In our world today, too many people are hurting and need a place of comfort and healing. Sadly, some people have even been hurt by religious experiences, including too many women, too many non-whites, and too many LGBT people.

So I am really glad that Covenant is a comfortable place, a place of welcome, and healing, and peace, and grace—for all people.

But church isn't just about being comfortable. Church is not simply a comfortable respite from the chaos of the world, a place for a donut and good conversation.

Church is also a place where we hear the challenging call of the gospel—to sacrificially serve others, to deny ourselves, and to lose our life in order to find it. Church is where we need to start wrestling with the complex issues of the world and our lives and figuring out how we can respond, so that we really can love our neighbors, and love our enemies.

Church is where we find the strength and courage in our relationships to forgive, to speak the truth in love, to sacrificially care for others.

We can think of church as a sort of a refueling station, where we take comfort in the healing, the peace, the grace of God, and then we go forth, with new courage and conviction to make a difference in the world, and sometimes to take risks and do hard things.

Church is where we learn to follow Jesus.

With these challenging words of Jesus in mind, today's a good day for the question: If being a follower of Jesus were a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Or putting it another way: We love to sing “They’ll Know We Are Christians By Our Love.” But will they? Does anyone in your life see God’s radical and sacrificial love working in you?

Listen to the words of Jesus again, this time from *The Message*, a paraphrase of the Bible by Eugene Peterson:

Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?

Each one of us is in a different situation and we hear this words in our own contexts. But the call is the same, for us to do what we can to love our neighbors, and putting this into practice this might mean hardship and suffering for us.

This doesn’t mean we run out and join every cause and try to do everything for everyone. We can still be thoughtful, strategic, and prayerful, working together with courage to face the challenges and hardship around us.

So I can’t stand up here and tell you what you have to do in your particular situation, or what to think about a particular issue. We each have different perspectives.

But I can stand here and tell you that as Christians, as followers of Jesus, our call is sometimes challenging and risky. Being a Christian may lead us into taking unpopular stands and doing things that other people don’t like.

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Over the years, I’ve heard about a novel by South African novelist Alan Paton called, *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*. It is set in the days of apartheid, the entrenched system of white racial power. I haven’t read the novel, but I’ve read about it. The book is about a white South African headmaster named Robert, who resigns his post when his school is not permitted to play a black school team.

After Robert resigns, he is visited by a black man named Emmanuel, who wants to meet the courageous former headmaster.

As they talk, Emmanuel shares that he is going to join a multi-racial political party, something that will make him an enemy of the white ruling government and of some black people too.

I admire this character's courage and his willingness to step in the middle of the struggle and try to build bridges, rather than run to the extremes of violence.

Robert warns Emmanuel of the potential for suffering. "Yes," he responds, "I'm going to get wounded, also. Not only by the government, but by my own people as well. Just like you."

Before he leaves, Emmanuel says: "I don't worry about the wounds. When I go up there, which is my intention, the Big Judge will say, 'Was there nothing to fight for?' I couldn't face that question."

Being a faithful Christian requires courage, as we are called to serve God and work for the sake of the kingdom in our world. And sometimes that means a struggle or a fight, which isn't easy.

We live in a world with horrific gun violence, with growing extremes of wealth and poverty, with increasing global warming, and with many other divisive and complex issues.

But sadly, we are increasingly polarized socially and politically, with little progress toward solutions. Too many of us have retreated to our ideological corners, where we look dismissively at those in the other corner.

I wonder if the truly wise and faithful and courageous thing to do in our world today is find new resolve to build bridges and find common ground on these divisive issues. It's easy to stand on one side and point fingers at how wrong the extremes on the other side are.

It's harder but probably more fruitful to listen to diverse other opinions, to avoid simple generalizations about how "those people" think and then figure out productive next steps.

And maybe the same idea is true in our families and our relationships, that the wise and faithful and courageous thing to do is to build bridges and find common ground.

So I give thanks to God for this church, this place of comfort, where we are renewed in the love of God, and where we together we muster up the courage to take up our cross and follow Jesus, for faithful and engaged living in the world.

Let us pray:

Lord make me an instrument of your peace  
Where there is hatred let me sow love  
Where there is injury, pardon  
Where there is doubt, faith  
Where there is despair, hope  
Where there is darkness, light  
And where there is sadness, joy

O divine master grant that I may  
not so much seek to be consoled as to console  
to be understood as to understand  
To be loved as to love  
For it is in giving that we receive  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned  
And it's in dying that we are born to eternal life  
Amen