

“Following the Leader”

I have got a burning question for each one of you. Well – actually – two! How many of you consider yourself a leader? And then how many consider yourself to be a follower? Would you believe that most people say that they are leaders – usually trying to give the answer that is expected? For example, a young woman was filling out her college application, but her heart sank deeply when she read the question on the application that asked, "Are you a leader?" Trying to be both honest and conscientious, she wrote, "No," and she turned in her application, expecting the worst to happen. To her surprise, she received this letter from the college: "Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."

I believe that there is a time to lead and a time to follow – if you noticed – my hand was up to both, because obediently following a leader may result in obediently leading others. Each of us is gifted with the ability to do both – but we need to have the knowledge and wisdom to know when to do which. King Solomon made it clear in Ecclesiastes 3:1 *“There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven.”* I wish I had a nickel for every time I played the song by the Byrds called “Turn, Turn, Turn” which is taken right out of Ecclesiastes 3:1. We need to know when to do either – but we also need to have the wisdom to know who we are to lead and even more importantly, especially during this presidential election year – who we are to follow!

Twenty times in the New Testament, Jesus uses the term *“follow me.”* Mostly as an invitation – asking people to come on along with the Lord, however in some instances Jesus sets some conditions. For example He says "Come, *follow Me and I will make you fishers of men.*" (Mark 1:17) More importantly, Jesus invites people to make a sacrifice in order to follow Him: *"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me.*" (Matthew 16:24) (also Mark 8:34) In Luke 9:23 Jesus adds the word *“daily”* to *“take up his cross”* In order to follow Jesus – there are terms; there are conditions that must be agreed to.

Almost everyone here has a smartphone on which there are programs, or apps. If you work on a computer, even doing your email – there is an app. When you download software, you have to agree to all sorts of conditions before you are allowed to use it. Have you seen the “agreement screen” that comes up telling you that you can’t copy it, or sell it to anyone else? They put all of this stuff in a really wordy and difficult way. Most people just agree to it without reading it. You probably need to check with your lawyer before hitting the “agree button. Do YOU read the whole “terms and conditions” before hitting agree?

This is for real: one computer program – several years ago - that I wanted to download came in two different versions, the free one and one you have to pay for. When the computer prompted me which one I wanted, its’ wordy terms and conditions told me that if I chose to pay for the

program, the company would erect a giant statue of me on their front lawn in downtown Seattle! When I looked more closely, however, there was some even more fine print. It read, 'Giant Statue Offer not valid for anyone living on Planet Earth.' They were checking to see if people were reading the words before just hitting agree – by putting in some absolutely absurd things. I can tell you that now I read the screens more carefully.

Have you ever wondered that when Jesus says take up your cross, exactly what does He mean by cross? Jesus refers to the cross prior to His crucifixion – and yet He is speaking about a cross. What does He mean? The apostles don't know that He will be crucified! When you think of the cross don't you usually think of the hard wood that Jesus was crucified to? Unfortunately quite a few in today's day and age seem to have sanitized the cross. When you see crosses they are usually somewhat symmetrical and tidy. They make great jewelry and are often used as symbols of our religion or our faith. Some people have relegated them as good luck charms. Rappers wear big silver crosses around their neck and you know by their language that they certainly don't have any respect for the cross.

Let me offer some clarity to the original meaning of the cross. It was a very cruel instrument of torture and execution; (one of the most horrible ways to die!) similar to the guillotine at the end of the eighteenth century in France or the gallows for hangings until the 1960s. It was the same as the Gas Chamber to Jews during the holocaust of World War II or even the Electric Chair right here in America. All of these things – these horrible symbols mean death!

How very ironic that the very symbol at the forefront of Christianity is the thing which brought death to its founder and the death which bought us our freedom from sin and death! It was a very painful, physical, and excruciating death. If we choose to follow Jesus, then His way must be our way. The Apostle Paul in Romans 12:1 tells us to present our *“bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”*

Sacrifices in the Old Testament were to be completely consumed, and we have read that the altar in the tabernacle, or at that same altar - the four horned altar in the Temple - most of the times burned sacrifices of animals. There were grain offerings, and drink offerings used for very specific roles in religious activities. God for the most part allows us to live – but not for ourselves and this means deciding just who Jesus Christ is to you. In last week's sermon I asked a list of questions: if Jesus is this --- or is He not? When Jesus instructs you to deny yourself - He is asking you to bring death or a sort to your own wishes and desires, and give life to His - which in fact is the only way to ultimately gain true joy and satisfaction. Like so much in the Gospel, this is a paradox; *“if you want to save your life, you have got to lose it.”* Lord, please give us ears to hear, minds to understand, and hearts to follow you!

You have got to admit that in our comfort driven Western World we don't do a very good job denying ourselves. Pain and suffering are seen as signs that we have failed in life. How often in today's culture we look at people who walk with a limp as being less than perfect, less than useful. Other cultures see pain and suffering as ways of achieving success. Personally – I am

not a fan of pain and suffering. I have had far too many surgeries in my life – but I cannot and will not blame God for that or for the arthritic pain that is with me always, or for the car accident in 2012 when the 88 year old woman who ran the red light, changing my life forever, giving me severe back pain – nor do I look at myself as a failure. Instead I look at how God can use each of these for ministering to someone else who might be experiencing or about to experience a similar situation. I have been at the bedside of many people who are about to have or have just had a hip replacement, or knee replacement, or discs replaced in their neck. I have sat with people who are about to or have had their colon re-sectioned – and I could share with them that I too have a “semi-colon” having 18 inches of my colon removed in 1994. God even uses some of you to minister to others facing difficulties. Difficulties that you may share in common – and now you can mentor people, walking forward. God uses everything for good and He uses all of us in so many ways.

I have a picture hanging in my living room; it is a picture of Jesus standing in a doorway. This is called ‘the Invitation.’ Behind Jesus is a room that is absolutely glowing, with people sitting at the tables. The man at the doorway is on his knees, looking up at Jesus, pointing to himself, saying ‘me?’ ‘You want me?’ The answer to that is ‘yes, He does!’ Each one of us are called; are called to Him.

There are some Churches that advertise Christianity for what it can do for you, and how it can make things better for your lives – especially those who believe in what is called the “prosperity Gospel.” Jesus doesn’t tell people to ‘*come and follow*’ Him because it will make their lives more comfortable – but because following Him will make their lives eternal and everlasting.

Now here is the fine print! Here are the conditions: Jesus says “that if you want to be My follower” don’t expect a life of complete happiness and freedom from pain. Instead, Jesus says, we can expect to die, and we might even die painfully. When Jesus tells us to take up our crosses this is something that “WE willingly have to do.” Taking up our cross is not something that is done to us or for us. I’ve heard people speak about various ailments and problems that have happened to them saying that they have this as ‘their crosses to bear.’ I am sorry but I have to disagree. Taking up our cross is something YOU must choose to do. You must choose to make a sacrifice for the sake of the Kingdom of God. I want you to listen carefully to what I am about to say to you.

- A serious illness is not a cross to bear,
- financial difficulties are not a cross to bear,
- the loss of a loved one is not a cross to bear, instead consider them more of a thorn in the side.

There is only one person who can and will help you through such a situation – and that is Jesus Christ – who will help you! Taking up our crosses is an actual choice we must make – not something that happens to us. If we willingly sacrifice everything for God’s sake, we have taken up our cross. On the other hand, if we make promises to God and we don’t give Him what we have promised, then we are no better than trying to have our cake and eat it too!

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus gives us His conditions. A long time ago ‘in a galaxy far, far, away’ I was a technical instructor for AT&T, and at one point in my 26 year career, I taught the UNIX programming language and operating system to customers and technicians. I would explain conditional statements. You know – Parents know conditional statements – ‘if you do this, then you will get this’ – we all do that. When you call a company and the voice says for this press 1, for this press 2 – we need to tell the system how to respond for each of the numbers input. I would explain that conditional statements usually begin with the word “if” and are sometimes followed by “then” and then maybe an ‘else.’ Cross bearing is not an option we can take or leave. It is not a conditional statement that is followed by choices. We willingly do it – or not!

If you would follow Jesus, then you must take up your cross! It makes sense, really. If we would follow Jesus - we will go where He goes. Loving the people Jesus loved - outcasts, the poor. Living the life Jesus lived – filled with Integrity, Truth, Honesty and Purpose – Jesus knew what He had to do, and He wasn’t afraid to make enemies in the process. Let’s read the fine print for Following the Leader just like a program:

- **If** you want to be a follower of Jesus? **then** take up your cross! (put what will help the kingdom ahead of yourself)
- **If** you are not willing to take up your cross, **then** please don’t call yourself a follower of Jesus!
- **If** you are not willing to sacrifice everything you hold dear, **then** you have no business calling yourself a Christian, for then you are **ashamed of Him**.

No one said it was going to be easy! Remember, if we are following Jesus don’t be afraid. I have got to count sometime how many times the phrase ‘fear not’ is in the Bible. So, don’t be afraid -

- we have Him guiding us,
- we have Him leading us,
- we have Him giving us strength and
- in some circumstances – He is carrying us.

I just love that picture called ‘Footprints in the Sand’ in which it comes down to Jesus saying “there is only one set of footprints because I was carrying you!”

Regarding stuff and situations Jesus said in today’s Gospel, "*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.*" (Luke 9:58) All we need to do is give Him permission to lead our lives – and follow Him. Like the foxes and birds – let God provide and handle the details. I don’t know of any bird that wonders if they will have food tomorrow, or worried about a game and who will win, although in this area – most of the birds are Braves fans. They know that there will be food and provision – knowing that God will provide.

Anywhere we go - Jesus has gone before. He promises to guide and protect. Anything that happens to us, Jesus is standing there right beside us. And finally, when He does choose to end

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our journey, Jesus will be waiting for us to bring us home!

All Jesus asks of us is this – give Him everything. Give Him ourselves. Is there anything in your life you are not prepared to give to Him? (Ok now -be honest)

- Your family?
- Your friends?
- Your reputation?

Jesus wants them all, to do with as He sees fit – just lay them at the foot of the cross. Jesus then will be taking you down paths you've never imagined. You need not worry about what is on the road up ahead. We have our security in Him – the One who died to set us free. Then my friends, you will truly be following the Leader.