

“Following the Leader”

There are leaders and there are followers. Most people, when asked which they are, say that they are leader. I believe that there is a time to lead and a time to follow and each of us are 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 “that might sound like the song “Turn, Turn, Turn” well that’s where it came from. *There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven.*” Just as we need to know when to do either – we need to have the wisdom to know who we are to lead and even more importantly – who we are to follow! I may be the Rector/pastor of this church – but if the Bishop walked in – I follow him. You see, we sometimes wear two hats, and we need to know when to do that.

Did you know that twenty-two times in the New Testament, Jesus uses the term “*follow me.*” It is usually an invitation, asking people to come on along with the Lord, but in some instances Jesus sets some conditions. He says, “*Follow Me and I will make you become fishers of men.*” (Mark 1:17) Even 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, and 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. If you are on a computer there are times when you are asked to agree to conditions – like cookies. That’s nice if they are chocolate chip but it is not that kind of cookie.

When Jesus says take up your cross, what does He mean by cross? (and remember this was spoken well before His crucifixion.) When I think of the cross I usually think of the hard wood that Jesus was crucified to. Today, people have crosses that make great jewelry and are often used as symbols of our religion, while some people have made a cross a good luck charm and some don’t have any respect for it. The cross was a very cruel instrument of torture and execution, and one of the most horrible ways to die, similar to the guillotine in France or the gallows for hangings until the 1960s. It was the same as the gas chamber or even the electric chair. All of these horrible symbols mean death!

How very ironic it is that the very symbol at the forefront of Christianity is the thing which brought death to its founder and the death which bought all of 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 supposed to be completely consumed, whether burned, or a grain offering, or a drink offering 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. When Jesus instructs you to deny yourself, He is asking you to bring death to

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your own wishes and desires, and give life to His. How do we find out what God's wishes are? You must be in the Word. Last week I gave to each of the men present a book called "*365 Days of Prayer*." The intention is to get people into the Word of God – and 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!

In this comfort driven Western World we don't do a very good job of denying ourselves. Pain and suffering are seen as signs that we have failed in life. How often in today's culture do 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 always with me – nor do I look at myself as a failure – but 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 cannot tell you how many times that I have been able to meet with people who are about to have or have just had a hip replacement, or knee replacement, a disc 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 uses us in so many ways to help each other.

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 a "prosperity Gospel." Want a Cadillac – just pray! If you need a bunch of money – just tell God and He'll do it. 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 and the conditions: Jesus says "that if you want to be My follower" don't expect a life of happiness and freedom from pain. Instead, Jesus says, we can expect to die, and maybe 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 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. Please understand - 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 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 all 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!

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You know, when you call a company and the voice says for this press 1, for this press 2 – programmers actually tell the system how to respond for each of the numbers input. To confirm your appointment press 1. These programs are conditional statements that usually begin with the word “if” and are sometimes followed by “then” and followed again by one or more “else’s.” If you press 1 then do this, if you press 2 then do this, if you press 9 then “I’m sorry, I did not recognize your response. 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, and Purpose – Jesus knew what He had to do, and He wasn’t afraid to make enemies in the process.

No one said it was going to be easy! Remember, if we are following Jesus don’t be afraid: we have Him guiding us, leading us, giving us strength and in some instances even carrying us. All we need to do is give Him permission. Regarding stuff and situations Jesus said in today’s Gospel, "*The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.*" (Luke 9:58) All we need do is give Him permission to lead our lives – and follow Him. He is a gentleman. He is not going to just barge into your life and start doing things. You also don’t tell Jesus what to do, but you ask 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 game and who will win. They know that there will be food and provision – knowing that God will provide.

Anywhere we go - God has gone before in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. 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 our journey, Jesus will be waiting for us to bring us home! All Jesus asks of us is this – give Him everything. Thursday in the operating room, Doctor Wilson looks at me and says, “you look nervous.” I said, “I am”. She looks at me and said, “God has got this!” I know that, but it is hard. All Jesus asks of us is this – give Him everything – our heart, our mind, our spirit.

Is there anything in your life you are not prepared to give to Him? (be honest) Your family? Your friends? Your reputation? Jesus wants them all, to do with as He sees fit – just lay them down 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 dear friends, you will truly be following the Leader.