

I am sure many of you have played that popular children's game, Follow the Leader. It is a game that can provide so much fun and laughter. However, the "game" gets quite complicated if the leader goes where followers don't want to go. For example, if the leader begins crossing a narrow beam over a high crevice, or runs across a busy street, or squeezes through the entrance to a dark cave, these actions present challenges that are not fun, but daunting and dangerous. That is when most of us would probably opt out of playing the game.

Today, Jesus is telling the disciples what it really means to follow **him** as their leader. He is alarmingly blunt about what it means to follow him, and Peter does not want to go there. So, Peter and the other disciples are given a lesson that is all about Following the Leader, Jesus style!

Peter has just experienced a monumental *come to Jesus moment* where he responded to Jesus saying, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" Jesus had just called Peter a rock and said that he would build his "called out" community, the church, on the rock of Peter's faith. Jesus has just made Peter a kind of deputy leader in the kingdom of God. And, now, Jesus seems to ruin the moment they had all just experienced when he tells Peter and the others, "Look, the road to

Jerusalem is filled with nails. They'll pierce me and put an end to me, but after three days God will reclaim my life."

Well, only a short time before this, Jesus had given Peter the "keys of the kingdom," a major leadership position, with the power to bind and loose. And, as Peter now hears Jesus speak of what lies ahead, he has the audacity to seek to use his newfound sense of authority **to bind Jesus!** Peter clearly had a certain vision in mind regarding what it means for Jesus to be the leader they had hoped for. And, the things Jesus is now saying certainly do not fit his perception of the leadership they anticipated in a Messiah. Peter takes Jesus aside and says, "Come to your senses, man. Don't you remember I just pronounced you the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God? These things that you are talking about don't happen to God; and God forbid, they must never happen to you." Now, what really goes **unsaid** is, "Because, of course, that would mean that they would also happen to someone who followed you. Someone like me."

Peter's perception of the Messiah's leadership and his own importance as *keeper of the keys* is then abruptly shattered as Jesus barks back at him saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a scandal, a stumbling block to me, for you have set your mind not on divine things, but on human things." Well, the rest of the air escapes from Peter's self-important balloon

as Jesus goes on to say, "You want these keys? 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 finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?"

Peter and the disciples were ready for a Messiah who was supposed to come and restore the Jewish kingdom by overthrowing oppressive empires and they saw themselves assisting in this effort. But now, Jesus is talking about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die! Jesus gives them an ad hoc lecture in God's plan for the Anointed One and the kind of kingdom he is ushering in. And, following this kind of leader is just the antithesis of what they had anticipated.

Well, in our culture today, I have to say we are no different. We are a people who are interested in winning. We are people who want to be in charge and on top. We are self-absorbed people who want to stay within the cocoon of our comfortable lives and not get into the thick of the need in this world. We are people who live in a very self-centered culture, wanting to avoid the pain and messiness of life. We do everything we can to avoid suffering and self-sacrifice. Yet, Jesus tells us that if we want to gain life,

life that truly matters, we are to follow him and do as he does. He tells us we will gain life that truly matters when we follow him and sooth the pain of the sick, care for children in need, hammer nails in houses for those without shelter, share bread with the hungry, visit those in prison, help and assist people who have lost everything in hurricanes like Harvey, and deny oneself, letting go of our egos – **letting our egos die.**

Like Peter and the other disciples, we face the chasm between Jesus' call to discipleship and our own lives as part-time volunteers for the Gospel. Few Christians abandon everything for the Gospel's sake. Most of us simply fit our Christianity into the open spots on our calendars. But in this passage Jesus links the life of discipleship with his own path. We are to follow his leading. And, astonishingly, Jesus offers crucifixion to those who would follow him. In a bold assertion of God's boundary-crossing grace, Jesus takes as his logo the grim killing tool of the world's superpower and says to us, "Take up your cross. If you want to follow me, deny yourself; if you want to find your life, give up your life."

The gospel is an invitation to death before it bestows new life. This is how God's love will redeem and resurrect sinners from the futility of life devoted to profit and winning and the "all about me" syndrome that is so present in this world. Because Jesus leads by dying on the cross, we may

now give ourselves to him and die to the powers that possess and control us. Following Jesus is about following him into the messiness and dysfunction of the world and onto the cross. We do **not** control God or give Jesus the conditions to our discipleship; instead, we risk contamination and insecurity by releasing the need to protect our own lives.

Following the leader, Jesus style, means living in solidarity with Jesus' own way of life in this world. Instead of binding Jesus for our own self-preservation, we must faithfully follow and bear witness to him, "even at the risk of losing our lives." It is precisely by participating in this way of being Christ's body in the world that we find ourselves resurrected to new life. It is hard to follow Jesus to this place, but he says he will make good on his promise. Although new life, life that truly matters, will not be an easy life, Jesus promises that the day is coming when the "Son of Man" will appear in glory. God has already acted decisively and ultimately in Jesus and, on that day, he will repay everyone for what has been done. He will wipe away all tears and death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. The promise of full redemption for this entire world is unmistakable and certain. Thanks be to God!