

This pandemic has presented anyone in a leadership position with multiple challenges that were unforeseen. There's no "playbook" for leadership when the stakes are high, and there's certainly no playbook for what to do in the face of a 21st Century pandemic. Many of you are leaders in your profession and you have no doubt discovered these challenges.

As we look at the various leadership positions many of you hold in the world of education, the world of business, or the life of the church, I know good leadership is something all of us highly value within our community and our culture. We work hard to develop leadership abilities within our kids because we want them to be leaders. We need good leaders in every aspect of society. We give awards to people who demonstrate strong leadership ability. Higher education is a place where we intently focus on developing leaders. However, the obscure, unspoken message communicated by this emphasis on leadership is that being a **follower** is for losers. We do not often encourage our children to be followers. We do not give out awards for being followers. As a matter of fact, in today's culture the only place where one is really encouraged to be a follower is probably on Twitter! And, if we really take an honest look at our inability to follow public health guidelines during this pandemic, we discover how

challenged we are to be followers, even if people's lives literally depend on it. Yet, **followership** is the other side of leadership.

Well, Jesus' words to us today cut right through our perceptions of **leadership** and **followership** as we hear him teach about the kind of leadership **he** calls for and especially what it means to **follow**. And I have to say, his words are rather hard to hear. The question of "Who is willing to **follow** Jesus Christ?" is really THE big defining question of Christianity, and Jesus places it front and center as we hear today's gospel reading.

Today, Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" In response, impetuous Peter gets all excited and professes that Jesus is indeed the long-promised Messiah. Jesus then begins to explain things to his disciples saying, "It is necessary that the Son of Man proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religion scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive." As soon as Peter hears this, he immediately backs away and rebukes Jesus. Jesus' words shatter the glamor of following this long-expected Messiah. This is certainly not the kind of life Peter wants to undertake. While Jesus **seems** to be the Messiah, the Jewish people had never expected a leader who must suffer and die. That was simply ludicrous and irrational. Who in their right mind **chooses** to "proceed to an ordeal of suffering" as Jesus says he

is doing? And, who in their right mind wants to follow a leader who is on his way to die?

Lest we judge Peter too quickly, we need to take a serious look at ourselves. Most of us choose religion and come to believe important things deeply because we feel they are good for us. And, we like to participate in a religion that makes **us** feel good. We like a faith that fits our comfortable, recreational lifestyles but does not demand too much from us. We want to follow a strong God who “heals our illnesses, provides ample prosperity, guarantees security, urges our sports teams onto victory, and generally keeps us happy, healthy and wise.” (David Lose)

However, the things of God involve an honest confrontation with pain and the suffering of the world. The things of God always involve love and when you truly love, there **will** be pain and suffering. Suffering is not appealing. If anyone of us is offered a life of suffering versus a life free from suffering, you can be your bottom dollar we are going to go for the one that is pain free! Yet, this is where we must get very honest about the Christian life. Christianity is not about living an easier life or believing in a God we can turn to as our personal Santa Claus to help solve life’s problems and give us all we want. Quite frankly, following Jesus is often going to make our lives more complicated and challenging. Following

Jesus **does** bring a certain amount of suffering because it requires that we truly **love others**. Following Jesus demands we **care** for the **common good**, it demands we **love** and care for **others** as we love ourselves! It requires that we let go of self, and it's really hard to let go of the self. We **cannot** escape this reality as we live through this pandemic, as we face the pain and as we love others. And, as my dear friend, Bill Uetricht says:

The things of God involve an honest confrontation with pain. The things of God involve recognizing that not everybody is going to like you, that indeed you might be rejected, that love sometimes will take you to the hard places. The mission and ministry of love is not easy.

Quaker theologian and philosopher, Elton Trueblood, clearly understood this when he wrote, "In many areas, the gospel, instead of taking away people's burdens, actually adds to them. Occasionally we talk of our Christianity as something that solves problems, and there is a sense in which it does. Long before it does so, however, it increases both the number and the intensity of problems."

In today's gospel reading, Jesus continues to teach his disciples about what **following** him is really going to mean. He says, "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. If any of you want to follow me, you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. 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?”

The point at which Jesus says this to his disciples is a pivot point in Mark’s telling of the Jesus story. From this point on in Mark’s gospel, Jesus begins to show us how to die. We have been given life and Jesus now demonstrates how we are to give it up, give it away, truly let go of self. I think for most of us, this is an idea that runs counter to all that we **want** to believe. It really does seem irrational. This was not what Peter wanted to hear and it is not what we want to hear. Yet, Jesus makes it absolutely clear that God does not care about giving us all of the things that make for creature comforts. What God does care about are matters of the heart. Jesus makes it clear that if you want to have meaningful life that truly matters, you are going to have to hand over your petty obsessions, your mistaken priorities, and yes, this malignant focus on individualism that is permeating our culture. You are going to have to think more about loving than being loved, more about working to understand than being understood, and more about forgiving than being forgiven.

The life that has been packaged and sold to us in this culture is not real life and we need to die to those illusions if we want to live into the

abundant life God wants for us. But the things of God are **not** something we can buy or earn. Like love and grace, the things of God, the very life of God, are all gift and can only be given away. Only when you give your life away for the sake of others do you really discover it.

As Jesus begins his relentless march to the cross, he challenges each one of us to follow. Today, Isaac Webb makes affirmation of his faith in Christ and recommits himself as a follower of Jesus. Today, we as a community of Faith, celebrate sixty-five years of being a presence in this community, sixty-five years of being a community that follows the way of Christ, the way of the cross. Today, we recommit ourselves to continue to be the kind of presence and witness in this world that truly cares for others and loves others as we love ourselves, taking and bearing Christ's creative and redeeming Word into this greater community. As we live into our sixty-sixth year of life together in this place, it is time to **follow**. It is time to follow the leader who will gift us with life that truly matters. And, the paradox is that when we **follow** this one called Jesus, the one who leads us to the cross, it is in that place where we find out what true **leadership** is really all about.

(Show video of sixty-five years as Faith community.)