

**In Praise of Leaders Who Follow
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Mark 8:31-38**

Imagine gliding along in a canoe, on a lake as smooth as glass, within sight of majestic pines and a true blue dream of sky overhead....see yourself laughing and talking with friends gathered around a crackling campfire....can you picture it? If you were in church one summer Sunday you heard me describe the annual Algonquin canoe trip that way, trying to recruit another adult leader. Well, even after that enticing offer, none of you bit, so the trip had to be limited to four young men and their leader Brendan Pham.

As it turned out, this trip—which the church has sponsored for some 17 years without mishap—had a terrifying conclusion. On one of the last nights, the metal carabineer that had been used to secure a hammock to a tree gave way, propelling it around the tree and into the side of Greg Fisher's head, where it literally cracked his skull.

Brendan performed emergency first aid, but knew immediately that Greg needed professional medical attention. Calmly he began treating Greg for shock, and organized the others to quickly break camp and pack the canoes. With Greg in the middle of one canoe, they began paddling in encroaching darkness for three hours out of the wilderness park to their waiting automobile and another hour's drive to a small regional hospital.

Greg is fine, and though there was concern in the first few days that he might need surgery, or have sustained permanent injury, he was able to begin college just a few weeks after the accident. The human body is amazing in its capacity to heal, which I have no doubt was assisted by the prayers and loving support of this community. But I'm also sure that he got along

as well as he did because of the decisive and effective action taken by Brendan.

Today we are ordaining and installing leaders for our congregation: elders, deacons and trustees. These are the men and women chosen by God and elected by this church to govern, to serve, and to manage, for the purpose of helping Fairmount fulfill the sacred mission to which we are called. The job descriptions are all laid out in the Book of Order, and these new officers participated in training sessions to prepare them for their work. But have you noticed how there is often a disconnect between the description and the reality? The picturesque scene of adventure in the Canadian wilds I portrayed in the comfort of the air-conditioned sanctuary bore little resemblance to the danger and confusion of a sudden accident. True leadership is demonstrated by flexibility, courage and perseverance in the face of the unexpected and potentially disastrous. But you don't often get that in the marketing message.

The morning scripture text might be subtitled "truth in advertising." Here the rising rabbinical star who has attracted crowds by his authoritative proclamation and dynamic healing ministry lays out the cost of following him. It was hard to sell then, and it plays no better now. Listen for God's Word to the church in the reading from the gospel according to Mark in the 8th chapter at the 31st verse. [Mark 8:31-38]

We have only recently hired a marketing consultant to assist us in telling Fairmount's story, in getting the word out about our caring congregation, dynamic mission, and broad welcome to people seeking a thoughtful Christian faith. But I wonder how best to advertise a faith that calls for cross bearing and losing one's life, as Jesus bluntly declares in this passage. How can we market that kind of church successfully? And what are these new leaders signing on for—for that matter, what are any of us getting ourselves into when we choose to follow Jesus?

Maybe that's why Jesus put his invitation contingently: *If* any want to become my followers...IF. Truth in advertising. Know what you're getting into. Seeking Christ's way probably won't be a successful enterprise by human calculation. Winning and losing get turned all cross-wise. Self-absorption has to go, as one voluntarily shoulders burdens one could just as easily avoid. Life is the outcome, but it is given in the opposite way from what we expect: through dying to preoccupation with survival—whether personal or institutional—and following Jesus into risky places of conflict, change, and challenge.

One of the unexpected benefits from a week's worth of jury duty in Cuyahoga County (I never actually made it to a jury, so I had plenty of time to sit around) was reading Doris Kearns Goodwin's massive book on Abraham Lincoln entitled "Team of Rivals." After Lincoln's election to the presidency in 1860, he turned around and appointed three of his political rivals—men he had beaten out for his party's nomination—to his cabinet. He understood how much could be gained from considering a broader range of views, a variety of perspectives. Cabinet meetings were far more conflictual than they might have been had he chosen only supporters. At times the different viewpoints clashed strongly. But the team Lincoln forged from these former rivals was responsible for steering the country through its days of severest challenge; through the dissolution of the union and the Civil War and the emancipation of black slaves. To a great extent, Lincoln and these leaders had to deny their own agendas and take up the burdens of a deeply divided nation.

I know of no other way for Fairmount leaders to steer this ship than by giving up their own agendas, taking up the burden of sacrificial love, and following Jesus where he leads us. We can only imagine what lies ahead: what dangers we'll encounter, what conflicts we will endure, what impossible tasks we'll be called to undertake.

But maybe we know more than we realize. Long before the incident on the Algonquin canoe trip, Brendan was nominated

to serve as an elder because of his recognized leadership skills. He's worked with youth since the days when he was one. He's been a leader on more mission trips than he can count. In his previous service as a Trustee, he utilized his experience in construction to make informed decisions about upkeep on our aging building and its infamous "leak of the week." Brendan was part of the family this church sponsored from Southeast Asia in the 1980s. Who knew back then what would result from responding to the call of God to helping a refugee family resettle in the U.S.?

The thing is, friends, we are not to choose actions because we think they'll lead to greater popularity and more buzz. We don't decide what to do on the basis of convenience or what we can afford. We do what we do because we believe these actions reflect the love and grace of God as demonstrated by Jesus Christ. We want to be his followers.

History is being made today with the ordination of this congregation's first youth elders. Hartley Brody and Cameron Needle are children of this congregation, baptized here and nurtured here through Sunday School, confirmation, youth ministry, and mission projects. I guess I don't know why we've never considered youth for service on our governing board, but their election is a powerful demonstration of the new thing God is doing right in front of our noses. Who knew what amazing outcomes would result when you signed on to be a Sunday School teacher, a confirmation mentor, a youth group advisor, an adult mission trip leader?

Another of our leaders was hungry for deeper connection with God and others. Through prayer and thoughtful consideration, she has felt a call to lead efforts to establish a "soul center" here at Fairmount, a place in which a variety of ancient and contemporary spiritual practices and programs will be offered to assist us in making our journey of faith vital and inspiring. Who knows what fresh possibilities for spiritual growth and renewal will be revealed?

I admit I've heard a few rumbles about the upcoming congregational forum on Ohio's minimum wage initiative and the Session's proposed endorsement of it. Why are we doing this? Why deal with a topic we know is controversial; about which Christians of good faith disagree? I'll grant you it may not be smart from a public relations angle! But I also believe that such dialogue is one of the crosses this church consciously shoulders in order to make a difference in the world God loves and redeems. Regardless of what the Session decides on this particular issue, we need to be ready to address other matters of justice together, because we're trying to follow Jesus who cared for the poor, the forgotten and lost. When we do that, we can leave the results to the One who is able to transform crosses into empty graves.

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. How in the world do we market a church with a gospel like this?! I say look to its leaders. Oh, they're not perfect. Not by a long shot. But with their promises and their actions they have committed to lead by following. To govern and serve and manage by following Jesus wherever he goes. And when it comes right down to it, this is the singular calling of every church member. Maybe you don't think of yourself as a leader: you're too old, you're too young, you don't know enough, you know too much, you don't have time.....think again of Christ's call: let go of your self-absorption, and take on the cross of caring for one another. You can start today by introducing yourself to a stranger. You can prepare to be a leader who follows by calling someone you know is struggling or you haven't seen in church for awhile.

I don't think I'll ever forget the long night's drive to Canada, with the uncertainty of Greg's condition, and fear of what we might find. I know for sure I'll never forget the sight of four weary young men keeping vigil at the hospital, sticking close by their friend, explaining "We came together; we're in this together; we want to leave together."

Friends, following the way of Jesus Christ is not a journey to be taken alone. Come and join us for the adventure of a lifetime. Come and join with others who will share the burdens we all face. Come and discover, along with the cost of discipleship, its inexpressible joy.

TO JESUS CHRIST WHO LOVES US AND FREED US BY HIS CROSS AND MADE US TO BE A KINGDOM, BE GLORY AND DOMINION FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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