

“WHOM DO WE FOLLOW?”

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Scripture Texts: Acts 5: 27-32, John 20: 19-31

Every morning when I'm in the office here at Fairmount, I hear the lilting voices of the small children from the cooperative preschool program as they pass by my door. They're singing, "We're following the leader, the leader, the leader; we're following the leader wherever she may go!" Whether small children or more mature people, we human beings have the seemingly inbred instinct to follow. Perhaps that's the reason Jesus so often used the word "sheep" in talking about those whom he loved and cared for.

Following a leader can be an adventure, a real risk, a danger or perhaps even a total disaster. Throughout human history people by nature followed kings or charismatic political leaders in creating new nations, in building dynasties, and in demonstrating overwhelming power at the expense of and detriment to others. Allegiance to such leaders is often based on emotions, the need for meaning or for missing self-esteem where such action makes one feel more important. The drive to be part of the dominant group, and "to call the shots," to have control over others is the very core of sin which plagues humanity. Such behavior kills relationships and substitutes success, "winning," material wealth, social status, and nationalism as the prime values. This is the way of the world and conventional wisdom toward which humankind naturally gravitates.

One can certainly understand the disappointment of the disciples as the events of the last week of Jesus' life unfolded, and it became exceedingly clear that he was not going to be the one they desired to lead them out from under the domination of Rome and its collaborators. What a shock it was when the inevitability became reality in his execution under the so-called justice system of the emperor. Their hopes were dashed and they were terrified that they were in grave danger of the same fate.

According to this gospel text of this second Sunday of Easter (John 20: 19-31), they were "holed up" behind locked doors fearing for their lives from those who had gone after their teacher and hoped-for Messiah. To their surprise and joy, the risen Christ appeared in their midst offering peace in the place of terrifying anxiety and delivered the Holy Spirit to be with them, to guide and empower them to continue God's work. The prospect of death faded in the new life and transformed relationship they experienced in Him. Through this encounter their lives were inexorably changed. As we read the New Testament account in Acts 5 we observe this transformation. (Read Acts 5: 27-32) These are the very same apostles who risk the judgment of the Council

and imprisonment to witness by the power of the Spirit within them to the life of liberation that Jesus Christ made an actuality. Despite the consequences that the world domination system threatened to bring upon them for their actions, they were committed whole-heartedly to their reconciled relationship to God and recognized the Holy Spirit leading them in the events of their lives. The way to which they had been called as believers, convinced them to follow unhesitatingly God's affirmation and seal represented in the Spirit. They were determined to tell people about the life of genuine freedom made possible in Jesus Christ.

These disciples, followers of Jesus Christ, had become men of courage, men of principle who in all circumstances were obedient to God. Their question was not if the course of action was safe but rather "Is this what God wants me to do?" They were certain that their function was to be witnesses for transformed life in Christ from their own first hand knowledge. They knew what they said was true and that being faithful left no other choice. They demonstrated the Spirit's reordering of their very lives.

The very crux of the resurrection is that transformation of life can occur. Bondage to sin and death has been broken by the revelation of God's on-going love and grace demonstrated in Jesus Christ and enabled by God's Spirit in our daily lives. Transformation is an on-going process, not a one-time happening. Jesus calls us to follow him in a way that is different from and confronts the conventional wisdom of humanity which is clueless to God's way of relationship. It is a way with God rather than apart from God. It is a continual process of loving and living for others and their concerns. It is inclusive, not exclusive. It is risking the challenge rather than playing it safe. It's the life revealed in these changed apostles in their outlook on their world informed by the Spirit within them.

Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, states, "For the majority of us, being born again (the new life of transformation) is not a single intense experience, but a gradual and incremental process. Dying to an old identity and being born into a new identity, dying to an old way of being and living into a new way of being. It is a process that continues through a life time. The Christian life as it matures is ever more deeply centered in the Spirit – that is, centered in the Spirit of God as known in Jesus, the Spirit of Christ."

The daily experience of the process certainly resonates with my life process as well as many other Christians I know. In the course of daily life, I sometimes realize that I've become bogged down, in a rut, or burdened with perceived powerlessness or anxiety. Usually the cause is that I have forgotten or shut out God. In the act of remembering God's abiding Spirit, of reminding myself of this reality of God in relationship – I sometimes feel a lightness of being rising out of my self-preoccupation and burdensome confinement. I think we are called again and again to come forth from our tombs.

Christianity is a “way,” a path or course of life in which the Spirit of Christ leads us. To live the Christian way takes practice in the means by which we live out that life. It requires paying attention to our relationship with God – being intentional and thoughtful about it, prayerful listening and being open, valuing it, finding joy in it. Such relationship shapes and forms us. It involves the deepening and changing identity of who we are. We hopefully transform the identity asked for by the world to an identity shaped and reshaped by God, in Christ. It moves from the head to the deeper level of the heart as the core of our being; focused on God’s on-going love and acceptance of us and our response to this love and its acquired ethos in our life for others. It is nurtured in community and in prayer which primarily listens and pays attention to God (ex. Taize Service, Labyrinth, meditation, contemplation). Community encourages Christian companionship – having some friends with whom one can share intimately about one’s journey in Christ.

How many of us long for such growth in relationship with God and others? These relationships are transformative and give our faith direction and meaning. They lead us out of self-centeredness and self-absorption to the world around us in its great need for genuine compassion and justice.

Now I risk the chance of moving from preaching to meddling but I feel compelled by love and the Spirit within to do so. I take these apostles as an example of what following Christ means – they were said to have turned the world “upside down.” They challenged the domination system and institutional religion with the Spirit and transforming power of Christ based on the partners of love and justice.

Paying attention to God means learning to practice compassion and justice. This practice is important both within the community of faith and in the world where that body serves. As fellow followers of Jesus Christ, compassion is to shape our relationships with each other. Compassion means inclusiveness and caring for every Christian sister or brother no matter the differences in ethnicity, race, gender identity, or economic status. Within the church, justice means concern for the structures and systems of church governance and organization. Examples from recent history come to mind: the ordination of ethnic and racial minorities and women was (and still is) a justice issue. Right now the status of gays and lesbians and transgendered Christians in the church is a justice issue, not only in equal membership but also in a faithful calling to ordained office and leadership.

The Christian’s and the church’s role in the world is the practice of compassion. We are to be tuned to the words of the prophet Micah, “O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”, and Jesus’ words, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mtt. 22:37)

Compassion means both charity and justice for all people and the distinction between them is important. Almost a hundred years ago, Vida Scudder, a Christian

activist, listed three ways that Christians can respond to a growing awareness of human suffering – “direct philanthropy, social reform and social transformation. Direct philanthropy means giving directly to those who are suffering, social reform means creating and supporting organizations for their care, and social transformation is about justice – changing society so that the structures do not privilege some and cause suffering for others.”

The first two are about charity, the third is about justice. All three are important – charity is good and will always be necessary, but historically Christians have been heavy on the first two and very light on the third. The obvious reason is that charity never offends; a passion for justice often does. Charity means helping victims; justice asks, “Why are there so many victims?” and then seeks to change the causes of victimization, that is, the way the system is structured. Justice is about social transformation. Taking the vision of the Scriptures seriously means the practice of social transformation. Christians are called to be political in the broad sense of being aware of the impact of systems on people’s lives and of God’s passion for those who are disadvantaged or victimized by those systems. This is where following the Spirit of Christ becomes difficult and risky. This issue involves consciousness-raising regarding real justice – moving away from the world’s “us-them” mentality, the maintenance of the status quo, perhaps changing our blind allegiances to party or nation, to identify our passions and energies in alignment with what God loves and with the Spirit’s leading in our Christian lives. In speaking to this issue, the late William Sloane Coffin declared, “But today what Christians need to remember is that God never stands for stability at the expense of truth, that God has no interest in any status quo whatsoever. For God does not want to freeze history, but rather to move it continually toward the ultimate goal in his kind of unity in justice and mercy.

So what the Christian community needs to do above all else is to raise up men and women of thought and of conscience, adventuresome, imaginative people capable of both joy and suffering. And most of all they must be people of courage so that when the day goes hard and cowards steal from the field, like Luther they will be able to say, “My conscience is captive to the word of God - - - to go against conscience is neither right or safe. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.”

So the question remains for each Christian to answer: “Whom do I follow?” Is it our society’s culture and values with its comfort, elite status and self-serving power? Is it the alternative way of love and justice that can transform life and its meaning? Which master will we obey? The apostles made their decision with all the risks involved. “We must obey God rather than any human authority - - - and we are witnesses to these things and so is the Holy Spirit who God has given to those who obey him.” (Acts 5: 29-32) Whom do we follow? May God through the Spirit of the living Christ lead us in our faith process to love and serve in the Spirit of Christ and to be part of the Lord’s transformation of humanity and the creation.

Amen