

Pent16_Proper19B_091612
All Saints Episcopal Church

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

This week I read a most interesting blog by a Presbyterian minister who is the director of the Center for Christian Leadership at a seminary in New York. He was writing about today's Gospel lesson and suggested that it is pretty ironic that we are called to be followers of Jesus when, in our society, being a follower is not a particularly great characteristic to have.

Think of graduation speeches...have you ever heard anyone congratulate a class for being the followers of tomorrow? Do we have a group in this city called Followership Mobile? Would you be happy if, on parents' night at your child's school, the teacher says to you, "You know, your child is a real follower"? If being a follower comes up at all, it is usually a negative: don't be a follower, be a leader. A follower is weak and passive...a follower cannot think or act for herself. Being a follower is for losers. (J. C. Austin)

I remember clearly as a kid, when I asked my mother if I could do something and she said no, I would usually retort with some version of, "But everybody else is going." And she always replied with, "If everybody was walking off a cliff, would you go, too?" Nope, being a follower is definitely not a good thing.

The blogger went on to say that the only place he can think of where being a follower is really encouraged is - can you guess? - on Twitter. Twitter is all about following. If you don't know about it, Twitter is one of the online social networking services - like Facebook - and others that are out there but about which I know nothing.

I am on the lowest of low levels of Novice in the world of Tweeting, but what I know is that the way you 'connect' with other people is by 'following' them. The difficult part is choosing who you want to follow. There are gazillions of tweeters out there. And once you choose, you receive on your phone or computer everything they say on Twitter. Believe me, not everything people post is something worthy of being read! So far, I have not tweeted anything at all, but you'll be happy to know

that - somehow - the Church Publishing Company has chosen to follow me! How do they even know I am here?

So when you open Twitter, there is always a box on the side that suggests some people you might like to follow - there's a name and picture or logo and each one has a little button (sort of like the 'Like' button on Facebook) next to it marked 'Follow.' Well, the blogger said that he opened his Twitter account the other day, and when he looked at the 'Who to Follow' box, it said he should follow Jesus. Literally. A Twitter feed for Jesus, he said. With a picture of him and everything, he said. So what else could he do? Since he is a minister, he couldn't NOT follow Jesus! So he did and now, he says, he gets regular updates from Jesus.

If Jesus' disciples and others in the crowds that followed him around had had Twitter in the first century, he probably would have been one of the people that they followed electronically as well. By the time this story about Jesus occurred, Jesus had already made quite a name for himself. He'd been around the country, healing people, exorcising demons and performing other miracles. Crowds that came to hear him were large. And he had a closer group of followers, the disciples - or students.

Now this story is of pretty big significance both for Mark and for us - it is so important for us, in fact, that we hear it, not just once a year in our lectionary, but twice. Maybe the lectionary elves want to make sure that we 'get it' better than the disciples did. They've been everywhere with Jesus, but when he asks them 'Who do you say that I am?' only Peter seems to get the answer right. But just a second later, even he - Peter - starts fussing at Jesus for saying that the Messiah will have to suffer and be rejected and even killed.

So Jesus calls the crowd to come sit down with the disciples and he tells all of them the answer to the question of what sort of Messiah he will be, what sort of Messiah they are following: he says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

It takes a lot more than clicking a button on your phone to follow Jesus, just knowing where he is and what he says and does. It means actually going where he goes and doing what he does the way he does it. It is important, especially given

how we misuse the phrase 'take up their cross.' How many times have you heard people moan and say, "Oh, he is just my cross to bear," meaning that suffering has been imposed on them and they have to accept it and endure without complaining?

But that's not what Jesus is saying. Suffering that is imposed on us against our will is not redemptive. Suffering on the cross was not imposed on Jesus; he took it upon himself willingly, intentionally. To take up our cross and follow Jesus means we follow him not only by refusing to think only about ourselves, but by suffering for the redemption of others, even if it means we risk losing our lives.

John Lewis, now a Congressman from Georgia, was the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the civil rights struggle in this country. He talks about what redemptive suffering is really like. When asked what you do when someone else is being attacked violently, his answer was that you don't stand there with your hands in your pockets, asking the attacker to stop and go away. Instead, he said it is your responsibility to intervene to protect them. But intervening does not mean fighting violence with violence; it means stepping in to shield your neighbor with your own body, accepting the blows yourself in order to save them, even at risk to your own life.

That's hard to accept. But I think that's because no one really wants to do that - to take up our cross and follow Jesus if it means we might literally lose our lives.

What seems to have made and continues to make it possible for people of faith like John Lewis to respond to violence with nonviolence is the realization that they are not just leaders in a campaign such as the civil rights movement, but they are followers first. They are following Jesus in insisting that God's reconciling love transcends anything that tries to resist it. Without being followers, being leaders is not enough; people have to be able to see and hear leaders following Christ in their lives and ministry for that leadership to really make sense in the first place.

This past week and its events in the Middle East has brought us face to face with questions about faith - Christians, Jews, Muslims, and others - and about how we act and react to people who do not believe the same way we do. Now, please do not think that I am about to talk about the political wrangling about who said what and when and whether or not it was the right thing to say. I am talking about faith and the reactions of people of faith to violence against themselves and against others.

I'm talking about us - Christians who claim Jesus as Lord - and whether or not we will go where Jesus went and do what Jesus did.

When violence is used against a people because of their faith, no matter who they are or where they are, are we doomed to stand by helplessly as fingers are pointed and hatred is spread? Is God's dream of a human family as beloved community never going to be realized? (Susan Russell)

These questions are not meant to be rhetorical. It is how we respond to violence and hatred that will determine the answers to them

One thing that we can do as a congregation is to be a place where we help each other become losers, losers of anything that keeps us from following Jesus: our fears and anxieties, our pasts or our futures, anything that keeps us from losing ourselves in the abundance of the grace that we receive, the love that we share, the ministry that we fulfill. (Austin)

As it turns out, we have a lot to lose. So let's get going...all we have to do is follow the leader.