

YOU WANT ME TO . . . WHAT?!

MARK 8:34-36

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Being a follower is not something that we encourage much in our culture. I don't think I have heard of any college commencement speaker congratulating the graduates as the "followers of tomorrow." Nobody writes bestsellers about great world followers. Nobody highlights all the ways that they have been superb followers on a resume. And, nobody's eyes light up when another parent comments that your kid is a "great follower." Following is completely undervalued – we all want to be leaders.

But there is one place in our culture where we are encouraged to be followers. Twitter – it's all about following. Twitter, as we know, is an online social networking platform – and you connect with other people by following them. I think pretty carefully about whom I follow on Twitter – I ask myself – do I really care about what this person has to say – is it worth my time?

A pastor named J.C. Austin was looking at his Twitter account – and as it opened up, he glanced over at the corner of the screen where there is a box entitled "Who to follow". It gives suggestions of people whom you might want to follow – and you can simply click to begin following their comments. One day, though, Twitter went beyond being a social networking tool and became an online evangelist because it said that he should follow Jesus Christ, literally. A twitter feed for Jesus Christ, with his picture next to it. So he said to himself, "I'm a minister, how can I *not* follow Jesus Christ?" So he clicked the button to follow. And now he regularly gets updates from Jesus Christ, which he says are "sometimes funny, sometimes provocative, and often insightful – not all that different from the Jesus we encounter in Scripture."

I'm imagining that if Jesus had lived today, he would have had a lot of Twitter followers – people would have been fascinated by his take on life, his miracles, his stories, and his massive crowds. But I wonder how many would have become his disciples.

As people of faith, it's easy to be confused about what it means to follow Jesus. We are enthusiastic about the joys of discipleship – the comfort and strength that Jesus promised. Unfortunately, the challenges are sometimes daunting – Jesus says some things that seem pretty extreme to our ears – granted I believe he was often doing that to get our attention but they're still a challenge. "Do not judge so that you may not be judged." Or "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." And what about, "Take up your cross and follow me?" It isn't long before we think, "Who on earth signed me up for this program, anyway?"

The Scripture that you just heard focuses on some of Jesus' words that make me wonder what it means to follow Jesus. So let's begin with the back story. As soon as Jesus begins to speak of what is about to come in his career as Messiah – rejection, suffering, and death – Peter is quick to try to set him straight. He takes Jesus aside and argues with him. We can imagine him saying, "No, no, Jesus, this is not the way it is supposed to go. The Messiah is supposed to conquer the Romans, not get killed by them. What good is a dead Messiah?" Peter was not willing to follow Jesus into this. He seemed more than willing to accept the joys of a journey with Jesus – but as for suffering, he didn't want any part of it. Do you blame him? Who chooses pain?

So Jesus took this moment to offer some challenging words that can be a little difficult for many of us to take in:

"He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" (Mark 8:34-36)

Mark is writing this gospel after Jesus' death when the disciples are just beginning to experience persecution for their faith. Compared to the dangers many of those disciples faced, what we go through in our lives pales in significance. Let's be honest, discipleship for most of us will not likely be a life-or-death matter. So, how do these words still have meaning for us today?

Let's begin with Jesus' honesty. No one can ever say that they were manipulated into following Jesus with false claims. The honesty of great leaders has always been one of their prominent characteristics. It's almost as if the more honest they are, the more committed their followers become. In the days of the Second World War, when Churchill assumed leadership of Great Britain, all he offered was "blood, toil, tears, and sweat." Yet, he also presented a vision of sacrifice, determination, courage, and hope that ignited his people to follow him through some very dark times.

Jesus never tried to sugarcoat the path of discipleship for those who followed him. Yet, despite the risks, countless people have taken up the discipleship challenge over the past two thousand years. What is it about Jesus' call to discipleship that ignites us?

I believe it's because Jesus challenges us to a life that is more meaningful than we can imagine. He dares us to a life of courage and purpose. The essence of this life of discipleship is one of spending life, not in saving it and hoarding it. If all we do is live carefully, making sure not to risk anything, thinking first of our own comfort, security, and ease, if our only goal is to make life as long and as trouble-free as possible, then we are losing a piece of our souls and we are missing the purposeful life that Jesus offers to us.

At 23, I was boldly challenged to take a risk and leave my job, trusting that I was being called to pastoral ministry. That time of risk brought joy and purpose and exhilaration. I have to admit that many years later, I count the cost much more now before I take a risk of faith. On my 60th birthday, one of my dear friends painted me a picture with one of my favorite sayings: "Life begins at the end of your comfort zone." Those words remind me that risk is an essential part of the life to which Jesus calls us.

What did Jesus mean when he asked his followers to deny the self? Does it mean to give up something during Lent? Does it mean self-sacrifice to the point of burn out? Or does it mean letting go of those things that stand in the way of the meaningful life that Jesus offers us. Sometimes we have mistaken beliefs about what we should deny. God never asks us to die to the parts of ourselves that bring

life to our souls. But, we are being asked to search our hearts to see which of our behaviors and attitudes get in the way of following Christ. What gets in the way for us— fear, hanging on too tightly to expectations, resentment, control, avoidance of suffering? When we hold on too tightly to the things that are an obstacle to a deeper relationship with God, we also remove the real presence of Christ in our situations.

Jesus asks us to take up our own cross in our following. Jesus is not telling us to seek out suffering. Jesus didn't seek it, but he knew that it was an inevitable outcome of what he was called to do. Jesus is saying to us: "Take up your cross, accept it, because it will open you up to the place where you will be ready to receive the gift of the grace of God."

Taking up our cross means being willing to suffer the consequences of following Jesus faithfully, whatever those consequences might be. It means putting Jesus' priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort or security. It means being willing to lose our lives by spending them for others -- using our time, resources, gifts, and energy so that others might experience God's love through us.

We are daily called to pick up and carry crosses: crosses that are a part of being mortal, crosses that have been hoisted upon us that we don't want, and crosses we have chosen to lift for Jesus' sake. In the original Greek, these steps are stated in the present, continuous tense. That means, "Keep on denying yourself, keep on taking up your cross, keep on following me." This is not the decision of a moment, but a program for a lifetime, to be repeated again and again. This is what it means to be a disciple.

Does this mean that we can't protest against those crosses of suffering? Of course not. What it does mean to me is that once I accept those things I cannot change, I then ask God to show me the path of discipleship that opens up the realm of God more fully. Sometimes it means following in faith though the doubt may be real. Sometimes, that means taking the path of forgiveness by surrendering my hurt. Other times, it means trusting that even in the midst of my pain, God will give me strength.

There will always be those people who literally risk their lives for their faith. They will make some major life decisions and they will be applauded for their courage. Yet, most of us are asked to make smaller decisions that can ultimately make a great difference. There is a lot of cross-bearing going on all around us. There are many travelers on this road of discipleship whose names will never appear in newspapers or history books but who are just as courageous, giving of themselves in many small ways as disciples day after day, year after year, and whose lives testify to the presence of a strengthening Christ who walks with them in every moment.

Preacher Fred Craddock once wrote: "We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1000 bill and laying it on the table. "Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all." But the reality for most of us is that God sends us to the bank and has us cash in that \$1000 bill for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Usually living as disciples of Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time."

As it turns out, wherever we are called on this path of discipleship, whether it be in acts of great risk or small acts of service, all we have to do is follow the leader.