

Second Sunday after Epiphany January 17, 2021

John 1:43-51

Have you ever played follow the leader as a kid?

I remember those games, particularly up in Vermont at the summer home my grandparents had. The leader taking us through the woods and over the creek. I remember watching carefully for every hop, skip, turn and twirl they did and where they did it. So that I could match their every step and not get “out”. Striving to perfect my following to match as closely as possible the one in the lead.

Do you have those kinds of memories too?

Follow me, Jesus’ words to Phillip once he had found him literally commands Phillip to be on the road with him. To come play follow the leader. To go where Jesus goes, step where he steps.

This is the command, the invitation, Jesus gives to all the baptized, “Follow me. Go where I go. Move as I move. Speak as I speak.”

What does it look like to play follow the leader with Jesus? Well, let’s look at the witness of scripture.

It means touching the untouchable so that they might be healed, like he does for the man with leprosy in Mark 1:41. Who might those people be in our society today? The ones who are considered unclean, dangerous to approach because they may cause you harm? The ones so desperate for human contact because

they are seen as unclean. Is it the homeless? Those struggling with mental illness? The poor?

Following Jesus means helping the mute to speak and the blind to see. To give them voice and sight as Jesus did several times in the gospels. To reintegrate them into the society from which they are alienated by their lack of voice. To give them the gift of seeing others, seeing the truth. Who does not have a voice in our society? Who cannot be heard? Where are people blind? What are the truths they cannot see?

It means being moved with compassion by the need of others, like Jesus is in Mark 6:34 as he sees the crowd gathered in a deserted place... coming desperate to hear what he has to say after the killing of his cousin John the Baptist because of political jealousy and hatred. A crowd some scholars believe were primed for insurrection, but instead of leading a revolt, Jesus taught them, healed them, fed them, and then sent on their way.

Following Jesus means understanding that while we are free in Christ to do all things, we understand that not all things are beneficial to everyone. That the freedom we have in Christ is not license to do whatever we want but freedom to not worry about ourselves so that we can serve our neighbors. It means looking out for others in our lives and trusting that God (and they) will look out for us.

There are examples of fellow believers who have followed in the way of Jesus. We will celebrate one tomorrow, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. A follower of Jesus who stood with the outsiders. Those who society said weren't worthy enough to come in. Who were deficient in some way. In this case it was because they were black. A follower who gave voice to the voiceless and strove to give

sight to the blind, so that white Americans might see the truth of the existence of their fellow citizens.

Dr. King followed in the way of Jesus by speaking the truth in love- that the laws and practices of our nation did not honor the image of God that resides in all people. That this hurt not only those oppressed (black Americans) but also the oppressor (white Americans).

Dr. King followed Jesus because he carried the same vision Jesus did, that all those created in the image of God are deserving of love and respect. He strove to follow Jesus by making bold calls for justice and equality- but did so with clear calls to his followers that they must not be guilty of wrongful deeds, that they should “not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.”

At the end, in the months before his assassination, he strove to follow Jesus by speaking for justice and equality for all the poor in our society with the Poor People’s Campaign. An echo of God’s call to care for the least of these in society. A campaign blind to race but seeing only need.

Dr. King’s following was imperfect to be sure. As is all of ours. But his eyes continued to be fixed and re-fixed on his leader, Christ. Studying every step, turn, and twirl.

While imperfect in his following, there are steps he got right. For we see in scripture that Jesus speaks truth in love to those who have gone astray, gives comfort and hope to the marginal and oppressed. That Jesus strives for justice in the world, not through violence and hatred but through love and peaceful action.

Follow me, Jesus says. Walk in the way I walk.

Who are we playing follow the leader with in our lives right now, my friends?

I fear that too often we are following someone other than the crucified and risen Lord. That we are proclaiming false gospels. Ones that do not lead to life, but rather hatred, death, and destruction.

I hear siblings in Christ breaking the 8th commandment against bearing false witness. Assuming the worst intent in others. Not bothering to talk with them. Listen to them. Making bold proclamations about who they are and what they want. Is that the way of Jesus? Is that following in his footsteps? I struggle mightily with this myself- that's why you hear so much about it. As I strive to hold myself accountable.

I see siblings in Christ talking about Jesus being their King- who literally hold the Bible in one hand and a gun in the other. Who shout their allegiance to the Prince of Peace in the middle of acts of violence against others created in the image of God. Is that a move Jesus made? Is that following in his footsteps?

The reality is that we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. That our following is imperfect, at best. That too often we wind up following someone else. That is why we need a savior. Why we need the visible sign of God's love in our lives, Jesus. Who continually pursues us when we go astray, taps us on the shoulder and reminds us, "Hey... follow me."

Thanks be to God for His infinite patience. His steadfast love and willingness to forgive beyond our human capacity. For we need it. I need it. Because I take my eyes off Jesus and begin to follow someone else. Begin to step where they step.

Go where they go. Speak what they speak. Until that tap on the shoulder comes.
“Hey...follow me.”

Thanks be to God for fellow siblings in Christ who call us to account. Who speak the truth in love to you and me, so that we might hear the voice of those who have no voice in our society. I give thanks for all whose who have opened my eyes to the truth, to see clearly the reality of the world around me. So that I might truly strive for justice and peace for all, following in the way of Jesus.

“Follow me”

This invitation, this command from Jesus is for you. All of you.

A calling to leave behind all other ways of being and follow Jesus along the journey of our lives. To step where he steps. Go where he goes.

A calling given to us at our baptism. Through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Remember our New Year’s resolution? To remind ourselves daily who we are? Let it also remind us who we follow. To reset our path each day. To study every step Jesus takes, every move he makes, with renewed energy, attention, and devotion. So let’s revise it a bit

“I am a baptized child of God. Deserving of love and respect. And God will use me to change the world as I follow Jesus.”

May it be so. Thanks be to God.