

Matthew 16: 21-28

August 30, 2020

Following the Leader

Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

I've shared with some of you before that I am a bit of a political geek--afterall, I almost majored in Political Science in college. I enjoy following news and analysis of both local and national elections. So naturally, presidential election years are very exciting for me. As I write this sermon, both parties will have just completed their national conventions. Conventions are always a political spectacle, this year was no different. Each party lays out its plan for victory. And the people showcased, elected officials from various offices, represent leadership. Our country values leadership. Even small children take turns being the line leader and leading the class in the pledge of allegiance.

Our church values leadership. Presbyterians hold church leadership in high regard. We believe that God calls people to serve as church leaders. Although you might think that pastor is the one who calls all the shots, the pastor works in conjunction and cooperation with the Session and Deacons to oversee the responsibilities of the church--everything from paying bills to building maintenance to discerning new mission opportunities. I focus much of my personal continuing education on leadership development, especially since leading a church these days looks much different than the church 20 or even 10 years ago.

Jesus' first followers were not the political elite, nor were they particularly powerful. Yet they were essential to spread the news about Jesus' platform: loving the Lord with all one's strength, heart, and mind and your neighbor as yourself. The disciples had witnessed Jesus heal the sick, feed a crowd of thousands, and walk on water. Although they surely understood that they were pitted against the scourge of Rome, Peter and the others knew that they would be successful, with God on their side.

Jesus begins to show his disciples that he will show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And despite that last promise--that Jesus will be raised, Peter, understandably, thinks Jesus has gone off script. "No wonder Peter protests. 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!' Jesus' response is swift and to the point: 'Get behind me, Satan!'"¹

Peter is the rock on which Jesus will build his church. Peter is also the one who swings so drastically from walking on water to immediately sinking in the waves. Peter has moments of brilliant insights, and cringe-worthy foot-in-mouth moments. Normally, we might explore how we are all a little like Peter (in terms of 'getting it,' and also being so spectacularly clueless). But there is a subtle difference in the text that helps us understand that Peter is also the metaphor for church leadership.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4565

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In our reading for today, Jesus rebukes Peter, but does not send Peter away; he reminds him to “get behind me [Jesus]. In Greek, the phrase is *hypage opiso mou*, “go behind me.” In Matthew, the words *opiso mou* (“behind me” or “after me”) signify discipleship. The proper place for a disciple is *behind* Jesus, in the place of a follower. For example,

- ❖ Jesus’ call to Simon Peter and the others: “Follow me (literally: Come *opiso mou*), and I will make you fish for people” (Matthew 4:19).
- ❖ In a discourse about discipleship: “[W]hoever does not take up the cross and follow me (literally: Come *opiso mou*) is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:38).
- ❖ In this week’s passage: “If any want to be my followers (to come *opiso mou*), let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

Peter is the recipient of blessing (Matthew 16:17), but now, he is putting his own thoughts ahead of the ways of God, which makes him a stumbling block—a hindrance to Jesus’ mission. Nevertheless (and this is significant), Jesus does not break relationship with him. Instead, he reminds Peter of the proper place for a follower.²

Peter does more than get ahead of himself; he gets ahead of Jesus. In the gospel of John, Jesus promises to go ahead of the disciples and make a place for them. “I am the WAY,” he tells them. Jesus is, indeed, the Way. And following Jesus means that we let him lead. This is sometimes hard for us to hear, because we are used to the kind of leadership that casts grand visions and ultimately accomplishes communally agreed upon goals and initiatives. When a leader doesn’t bring positive change to the status quo, we vote them out of office or boardroom. Even the term “follower” can sometimes carry a negative bias. We don’t always want to follow; we want to lead.

Following Jesus, though, is leadership, too.

Jesus calls us to follow him. He may lead us beside still waters and paths of righteousness, he will also lead us through the darkest valleys. I enjoy the “green pastures” and plentiful harvest side of discipleship and ministrul. It is easy to pursue ministry when the pastures are verdant and fertile; there is not much to risk there. But we might balk at serving others and Jesus when the circumstances entail personal, financial, or physical risk. The dark valleys need the light of Christ, too. Jesus leads us there because, if we are honest with ourselves, we might not otherwise go. Trinity has long been a congregation committed to mission and social justice. I appreciate the legacy and commitment. The reason we continue to support our partnership with El Salvador and with Topeka JUMP is that Jesus leads us to justice. Otherwise we might not remain aware of the needs of our neighbors on the other side of Topeka and the globe. Gun violence is probably not an immediate concern to many of us today. It’s a problem in Topeka, though. Jesus is leading us to work with community organizations to stop the

² *ibid.*

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violence. Gun violence is most definitely a “dark valley” community issue and some days, I would love to turn around, and lead away from complicated social issues and remain in a safe and prosperous bubble.

Jesus bids us to go behind him, not because he doubts our commitment or passion, but because he wants us to see what’s next. When Jesus is the leader, everything else will fall in line. Jesus, who holds the keys to Heaven and Hell, will even command Satan go *opiso mou* (behind me) and Satan will obey.

To serve Jesus, leading becomes an act of following. Followers of JEsus can lead the world in peace and justice. Amen.