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Psalm 19

Mark 8:27-38

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FOLLOWING JESUS IS FOR LOSERS

Part of the instruction I got during seminary about sermons had to do with sermon titles. One of my professors told the story that a student preacher was given an assignment to come up with a sermon title that would literally entice someone riding a bus who saw a church sign with the sermon title on it to get off the bus at a stop in front of the church and come in to hear the sermon. Upon consideration the student submitted the following sermon title: “There’s a Bomb on the Bus.”¹ My sermon title for today is “Following Jesus is for Losers.” If I were turning that in for an assignment, it might be received as a bit of a bomb. In fact, there may be some of you who would like to leave the sanctuary and get on a bus right now before hearing what a sermon characterized by such a title is like.

We as Christians talk about following Jesus, but the rest of society doesn’t like talk about being a follower much at all. If you note on your resume all those areas where you demonstrated strong ‘followership’ in your work, it definitely won’t help you get a job. No commencement speaker has ever congratulated graduates on becoming the ‘followers of tomorrow.’ If another parent were to come up to you and whisper, “I just want you to know – your kid is a real follower,” then how would you feel? When ‘following’ comes up at all in conversation, it’s usually negative. Don’t be a follower - be a leader. Don’t follow the crowd. Being a follower is weak and passive. It is for people who can’t think or act for themselves. Unless you are talking about being on Twitter, being a follower is for losers.

Our gospel lesson from Mark raises questions about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. When Jesus asks the question, “Who do you say that I am?” the disciple Peter is excited to profess that Jesus is the Messiah. But the instant that Peter learns that such an identity means Jesus must undergo rejection, suffering, and death, he is confused and rebukes Jesus. Even though Jesus mentions being raised from the dead, Peter thought the Messiah was to be somewhat like the great King David,

who would victoriously conquer the oppressive forces of Roman rule. Peter wants a God who shows divine power by overthrowing those who inflict suffering upon others, not a God who takes human suffering upon his or herself. I dare say most of us understand Peter's point of view. If you could offer me a scathed life or an unscathed life as a follower of God, I'd choose the latter. Who would welcome the experience of suffering if there were other options?

But let's look at who Jesus is. If Jesus is the clearest revelation of who God is, then we have a God who comes among us as a vulnerable baby, who knows what it is like to be a homeless refugee, who not only hears the cries of the poor, but has known poverty directly. This is One who has been an outcast and a victim of injustice. This is a God who knows firsthand what intense physical and emotional suffering is.

Jesus then tells his followers: "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." You and I can try to safe-deposit-box our lives, we can try to be cautious about whom we let get close enough to us to touch our hearts, but Jesus challenges us to lose that kind of attitude. If we are going to follow him, we need to be losers of our greedy hoarding ways. We need to lose our bitterness toward those who may have hurt us in some form or fashion. We are called to let go of or to lose our prejudice against those from whom we differ so we can work against racism and sexism and many other kinds of isms. How about we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, lose our complacency toward that which is unjust in our world! Each of us has some self-centered petty priorities that are out of balance with what is important in God's eyes. To follow Jesus, we are called to be more focused on loving than on being loved, on understanding that on being understood, on forgiving rather than on being forgiven.

In the very last paragraph of his great book entitled Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis writes: "The principle runs through all life from top to bottom, give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end - submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be

really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.”²

At the height of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, when Christians were literally suffering and dying for justice and redemption there, Archbishop Desmond Tutu used to gather his staff around him in the mornings for prayer. Often, as he was closing, he would ask, “If being Christian became a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict us?”³ Now the first time I heard that story I was greatly concerned - if there’s not enough evidence to convict Desmond Tutu of being a Christian, God help us all! But now I think he was asking the question to keep himself and his staff focused on who and whose they were, rather than just what they were doing. They were not simply leaders, leading an important social struggle for dignity and freedom. They were followers, following Jesus Christ in insisting that God’s reconciling love transcends anything that tries to resist it, which apartheid challenged in insisting that different races could not and should not live together. Without being followers, being leaders was not enough. People had to be able to see and hear them following Christ in their lives and ministry for that leadership to really make sense in the first place.

‘Who is willing to follow Jesus Christ?’ is pretty much the defining question of Christianity. As much as the church needs leadership development, and it does, that’s not going to count for much if we’re not developing our followership willingness and ability. This church should 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, our status or our schedules, our need to be in control of our lives and our faith, 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 could fulfill. What do we have to lose in following Jesus? Turns out, it is quite a bit! But there is even more of life that we gain! All we have to do is to follow the leader. Thanks be unto God. Amen.

¹ From a story told by Dr. Bill Carl, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia

² C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, HarperCollins, 1952.

³From a sermon, "Selective Memory," given by Rev. J.C. Austin at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church.