

“Follow the Leader”  
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Mark 5:21-43

Every morning, while having breakfast and reading my newspapers, I usually catch the beginning of the Today Show, before I head upstairs to start working at my desk. I've been watching the Today Show for as long as I can remember. A number of years ago, they started what is called “The Summer Concert Series,” where, every Friday, they have a musical act perform on the plaza next to their studios. They have all kinds of acts performing all different kinds of music - and the size of the crowd depends on the group performing on any given Friday.

Well, a couple of weeks ago, they set a record for the biggest crowd for a Friday concert - and it was for the Jonas Brothers. There were people in every possible space for blocks and blocks and blocks. Screaming, enthusiastic fans - of all ages - singing along, word for word, with the incredibly popular brothers. When interviewed, some of the fans confessed to having been camped out there overnight just to be able to catch a glimpse of the Jonases.

When I look at spectacles like that, I often ask myself - “who on earth would ever make me be a part of that? Who touches me so much that I would be a part of a crowd like that?”

Well, lest you think I'm above all that, I will confess to you that I've done it a few times. Once, was years and years ago - probably back in the 80's - might have been earlier. At any rate, my cousin Jane (who's an opera singer) was in a Metropolitan Opera competition at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, and one of the judges was Luciano Pavarotti himself. Well, guess who found her way there? Me, of course - along with my brother Adam. The place was jammed with people, and all I remember is being in the lobby of the Academy of Music, squashed up against a wall, craning my neck to look over the crowd - and then before I knew it, there was Luciano Pavarotti right smack in front of me. I thought I was going to pass out! (Me - the one making fun of the people swooning in front of the Jonas Brothers!)

Another time, in the mid-80's, I was part of a crowd at Andrews Air Force Base who gathered to see the arrival of Prince Charles and Princess Diana for a state visit. I was serving a church near the base at that time, and one of the

members of the church, a general, got me on the base and in the crowd, and after Charles and Diana got off the plane, they walked right in front of me - no more than six or eight feet away. It was a pretty incredible moment!

Now, why did I tell you about these two experiences in my life? Because I think they're not unlike the experiences that some of the people in this morning's Gospel lesson were having. I think they were following Jesus somewhat like I was following Pavarotti or the royals, or the people on that Friday morning were following the Jonas Brothers.

I think a lot of the people following Jesus that day were following him because he was somewhat of a rock star in his time. I was looking back over the earlier chapters of the Gospel of Mark, and before this passage occurred, several other things had already taken place. Jesus was baptized, then spent time in the wilderness by himself. He then called the disciples, taught in the synagogue, healed several people, and began to preach. It was at that point that the disciples first said, "Everyone is searching for you." So word had gotten around - that something was going on with this man.

Not surprisingly, not long after that, he began to be criticized. The Pharisees questioned his actions on the Sabbath. They saw the handwriting on the wall. They saw his increasing popularity. They saw the crowds beginning to get bigger and bigger. They saw more and more people following Jesus.

But that's where I think we need to dig deeper this morning. I'd like us to explore together this morning the difference between "following Jesus" and really "following Jesus." In other words, what's the difference between following Him out of curiosity, and following Him as a true disciple?

And the reason I want us to do that is because I think, if we're not careful, we can find ourselves doing the same thing many people have done over the ages - following Jesus at a distance, admiring him, listening to him when it's convenient, worshipping him for an hour on Sunday - but generally not letting our relationship with Him get too deep, or too costly.

All who claim Jesus as their Lord and Savior have to make a choice to really follow Him with their lives. And while that choice may seem easy, it's not, because a true life of discipleship is costly. Jesus says it himself - "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me."

It isn't always easy.

It isn't easy, for instance, to follow Jesus when you don't understand what

He's doing sometimes. Think of those persons in the crowd that day when Jesus didn't immediately go and heal Jairus' daughter. They didn't get it. Shouldn't this man who does miracles, who has healed people, go right away and take care of her? They didn't get it. They didn't understand why he didn't rush right over to her house and bring her back to life.

Maybe you know a little bit about what that's like. If you've ever watched someone you love suffer, and no healing comes, perhaps you've asked that question too. Why is Jesus not taking care of this? Why is he or she still suffering? Why?

Can you follow Jesus even when you wonder why?

Or, to follow the passage further, can you follow Jesus when someone else gets healed and someone you love doesn't? That woman in the crowd was healed after suffering for so long, but surely someone else wasn't healed about that same time.

Can you follow Jesus when you see someone else get healed and your loved one isn't?

Or, can you follow Jesus when it's uncomfortable to do so - like when someone backs you in a corner with questions about him? Did that happen to any of you after 9/11? Did anyone ask you, because they knew you were a Christian, how a loving Lord could allow such evil to happen? Can you still follow him then - when your back's up against the wall?

Or how about, even worse, when people are making fun of him? I don't remember if I ever told you about something that happened to me early in my ministry. I was in charge of the youth ministry at Aldersgate, and was getting increasingly frustrated because youth were being pulled away from church activities for outside activities on Sunday mornings. One of them was band competitions, and it seemed like almost every Sunday morning the youth would be absent because they were on their way to band competitions. Naively, I called the band director at the one of the schools, and asked if we couldn't possibly work together to enable them to do both. That I was sure he wanted the kids to have balance in their lives, and I was confident we could work out a compromise. Well, he said he'd try, and then, not two days later, the youth from that school called and told me that, in front of the whole entire band, while announcing the details for the next weekend's events, the times they were scheduled to leave, etc., the director added, "except for you kids who go to Aldersgate who have to go to church." He mocked them in front of the whole band.

Can you follow Jesus even when people are making fun of him, and you are

put in embarrassing positions?

And can you follow Him when it's risky? When you have to put your whole trust in him? A pastor I read about this week told about being part of a training retreat with a staff where she really had to answer that question. Part of the training experience was doing a ropes course - which is a course where you learn to trust your fellow team mates with your very life. One of the things they had to do on this particular training event was to get on top of this seven foot high tree stump and fall backwards into the arms of your teammates. You were supposed to get up on top, cross your arms in front of you, yell "falling," and then fall backwards into the arms of your waiting teammates. Well, this woman was terrified.

Listen to what she wrote about it: "I'm up on the log and I'm terrified. You know, intellectually, I get it, they were going to catch me, there were plenty of bodies there to catch me. But there was this emotional and psychological pull that I couldn't make my body fall. So the first couple of times I did it I actually sat instead of falling straight back. What happened when I did partially was you can kind of fall through the four people there because you hit so much weight at one place. You have to do it fully, you have to trust yourself and let go and fall fully back, you cannot do it halfway." (On-line, Trinity Church Boston, "The Cost of Discipleship," the Rev. Paige Fisher)

So it is with the life of faith, the life of discipleship. You have to do it fully, not halfway. It can't be a spectator sport, just an hour on Sunday morning admiring a Savior. You have to do it fully - that's what Jesus asks of us.

Finally, and this may be the biggest question of all: can you follow Him when what you want and what Jesus wants of you are in conflict? Talk about denying yourself, and taking up your cross. Can you follow Him when it means doing something different than what you want to do? Can you follow Him when it means turning away from something that you really want, and turning to something that you know He wants from you?

When I served as chairperson of the Board of Ordained Ministry, I can't tell you the number of times I heard ministerial candidates say that for years and years, they turned away from what God was calling them to do with their lives, because they knew it would be tough, only to finally say yes to ministry years later. God would never leave them alone. He kept nudging them and calling them and finally, they trusted Him and said yes.

Can you follow Him that way too? Can you allow God to call the shots in your life, totally trusting Him to guide you through your days? That's what it means to follow Jesus.

Great crowds followed Jesus almost every day of his earthly ministry. Some of them were there for the show, some of them fully accepted the life of faithful discipleship. They had to choose back then, and we have to choose today.

If you have not made that choice, to fully follow Jesus as a committed disciple, it's not too late. If you've been content to simply come here, and worship him for an hour on Sunday mornings, and maybe even at times during the week, but haven't taken up the mantle of discipleship, may today be the day you say yes.

The life of discipleship is not easy, it is, indeed costly. But that is what Jesus calls us to do - to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. It is, to paraphrase a commercial of a number of years ago, "the toughest job you'll ever love." But friends, it is also a job that has eternal rewards - right here, right now, and for all the days to come.

For if we follow Jesus, really follow Him with our lives, we will experience life in all its fullness, richness, and abundance. We will know eternal life now and indeed, for all the days to come. That is God's gift for us, if we will but say yes, to following Jesus as the Lord of our lives. Will you?

Let us pray:

Lord God, we heard you invite us, "Come follow me" but too often we want to dictate how that will happen. We want to follow you when it's easy, when there's not much risk, when it's convenient, and we don't have to rearrange our priorities or our schedules. We want to follow you when times are good, and nobody's questioning us. We want to follow you when your priorities and our priorities match. But too often we fall back when it becomes tough, when following you will cost us, or we have to turn away from something that we want. O God, give us the courage to say yes - fully - to following Jesus, and then give us what we need to keep saying yes day after day after day. For we know that when we say yes, we will live the life you created us to live, the life that your Son gave up that we might live. It is in His name that we pray. Amen.