

Followers or Admirers?

Matthew 16:21-28

Let's start with this: **this is a difficult teaching**. We shouldn't fool ourselves. It's better to confess this at the beginning than to pretend otherwise and lose our way in the end. The honesty with which we hold our lives before God is the measure of our desire to be followers of Jesus and not merely religious spectators.

Let me add this while I'm at it: it's the end of our lives that Jesus is concerned about in our lesson this morning. And when I say 'the end' I'm not talking about our last moment here on earth, but 'the end' as in *the goal* of our lives.

Question # 1 of the Shorter Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?" Asked another way, "what is our primary purpose in life, and how will we arrange our lives around that purpose?" The answer is worth remembering: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."ⁱ

At this point Jesus has come to the moment when he needs to be as clear as possible with his disciples about the days ahead of them. Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously called this "the cost of discipleship" and cautioned that it was not cheap.

Remember playing Follow the Leader as a child? The rules are simple. The leader gets to do whatever she wants, and the followers either follow or are thrown out of the game. Followers don't get to tell the leader what to do, that's her choice alone.

In some circles the leader goes places and does things along the way, and the followers must go along and do the things the leader does, even if it's not comfortable: walking along a board, jumping from rock to rock in a stream. Followers either follow the footsteps of the leader, falter, or just outright quit (if the task is too daring).

Christians play Follow the Leader, too, only the game is life and it never actually ends, except in death, unless we walk away and refuse to play any longer. Jesus is continually saying, "Follow me, and I will lead you in the way that leads to life."

Along the way we lose what the world tells us is important, and in the end, we discover our real life, and that's really important! We play this game all our lives in one way or another, whether we acknowledge it or not, it's a game of trust and choice. For those who follow Jesus the choice is always before us.

How far will we follow him when the path leads along a way that we don't yet know or understand? How much do we trust the one we're following? Peter couldn't fathom that his leader would go the way of suffering, and he resisted mightily. His trust was tested by the way of the cross that Jesus set before him.

In the children's game, the leader realizes that if your followers don't trust you, the game will end quickly. The followers will walk away. Jesus experienced that, and the same is true in our lives. Only our lives are never truly over until our baptism is made complete in death.

The real question becomes: Who am I following? What path am I on? Do I have faith in the one whose way I am walking? It may seem irreverent to call this a game because games are fun and silly. But even though this game is not silly and certainly not always fun, it will bring you to the deepest joy of all: discovering God's purpose.

So we're back at the opening confession: our lesson this morning is a difficult teaching. We find it strange to walk in the way of Christ. It leads you away from self-

preservation and points you toward the cross where your life is given away for the sake of others.

This is not a path that we ordinarily follow. We follow a way that protects us; Jesus followed a way that led to vulnerability. Yet he promised that as we develop the capacity to trust him, as we become more vulnerable, we'll actually find our heart's desire and enjoy life abundantly.

Discovering what God desires and orienting our lives in that direction is the way of the cross. It will mean personal sacrifice, inconvenience, and vulnerability.

Sören Kierkegaard once said that there are more admirers of Christ than followers of Jesus. You can admire Christ easily and still go on with church activities.

You can come to worship and feel morally chastised, or pleasantly uplifted and go home satisfied, only to return to life as it always has been with nothing changed; still admiring Christ. The choice is whether we will seek to be disciples being changed by faith decisions or be content to be an admirer of Christ.

Now, if this all seems confusing and too demanding, you're in good company. The disciples thought the same thing, especially Peter. This is pretty hard stuff. But Jesus didn't intend it to be so hard for us to understand. I think he wanted his followers to know something rather simple. He was going to die so that others may live. This is the meaning of the cross.

It is a paradoxical way of being whereby losing means gaining, where being vulnerable means being courageous. where dying means living. This is so counterintuitive that we often miss it. The more we embrace the way of the cross and the more we open ourselves to God's love, the more we discover joy and abundance.

Following Jesus is a way of life shaped by letting go. It's to find life at its most purposeful when we give our lives away on purpose. It's offering your cloak to the man who has none, walking the second mile when one mile seems enough, where turning the other cheek is wiser than striking back.

This is where we get confused; it is by choosing to die to the things that we take as "common sense" that we find joy in this mortal life.

A good leader tells the truth. Jesus told his followers to watch out: you can gain the whole world and lose your soul. It's a word of caution that we need to hear, because we're surrounded by messages that say otherwise. You can gain all sorts of stuff, power, and prestige, and realize you are empty, still looking for what satisfies the soul.

For those who follow Jesus the way leads to a cross. He told us that honestly, but he also told us as we learn to walk in his way, we will find life abundant. We can't follow this way in our own strength, and if we try, we only end up with the delusion of power and self-preservation, isolated from others.

The better way is the way of the cross. It's a game in which the goal is God's purpose for your life and living into that purpose. It's the way of faith, trusting not in your capacity to get it right or always do it well, but trusting in the one you are following.

We all follow someone or something. We all play some game. In the end it comes down to this: who are you going to follow? Amen.

¹ The Book of Confessions, 7.001.