

“Share our Faith by Following”

Salado UMC—Preaching Text: Mark 8:27-38

16th Sunday after Pentecost: 12 September 2021

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“Education is the leading of human souls to what is best,
and making what is best out of them” John Ruskin (1819 - 1900).

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Leading people is tough sledding. Being a follower is no effortless task either. Why?

Probably, because most leaders, as most followers, have their own agenda about how to achieve something. We come to tasks with preconceived notions about how we might do one task or another. When leading/following these ideas create friction regarding the work we are trying to complete. Jesus knew this. Jesus also knew his disciples require altering their world-view before they recognize God’s way of seeing the world—and how God wants disciples to see the world.

For example, a few years ago, I was putting medicine on some steer food. My daughter furnished a large syringe for the task. I tried to draw out the medicine from a bottle. I spilled some and the whole project mostly irritated me. Then Cassie entered the barn, took the top off the syringe, and calmly poured in the medicine. Lastly, she replaced the plunger and gave me a look that said: “You are hopeless.” Fortunately, for the steers, I furnished the medicine . . . and all was well.

What I learned in that painful experience was that I had an inflexible notion about how syringes draw medicine out of bottles. What I needed was a new way to do what I thought I already knew how to do—but clearly did not. Jesus came to give people abundant life, but obviously people’s preconceived notions then, like ours today, did not provide the results that they sought. Hear today’s Gospel lesson:

[27] Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” [28] And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” [29] He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” [30] *And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

[31] Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. [32] He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. [33] But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” [34] He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. [35] For 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” (Mark 8:27-35).

Jesus is cultivating followers. Mark’s text displays to us how perceptive Jesus is as he leads these disciples, to see their place in God’s world afresh. Jesus also invites them into this world. This heady business includes us as disciples. We can never follow Jesus if we fail to let Jesus lead us.

Our text slips followers of Jesus in a plain human dilemma: it is easy to speak about a faith in general. It is something else to exercise faith demands specifically as life presents them. This

situation means it is simple to say what we might do in a hypothetical situation. And . . . aren't we better judging another's deeds? We call this second-guessing. All churches have experts in this particular church-game. Jesus highlights this state of affairs when he asks two questions: "Who do people say that I am?" "But who do you say that I am?" One question is generic; the other concrete.

We each know people who with the best of intentions contradict themselves with humorous immediacy. Once, after I gave an obligatory devotion at a high school athletic banquet, the athletic director got up and offered these inspiring words: "It is amazing what great things a team can accomplish when no one cares who gets the credit." Then promptly he added, "I would now like to recognize the outstanding high school individuals have outshone their teammates." WHAT?

Jesus asks two questions: "Who do people say that I am?" and "But who do you say that I am?" Jesus contrasted a generic platform of loyalty with a specific call that acknowledges Jesus as a leader and Messiah worth following. Then Jesus spells out what the leader/Messiah must endure. Peter cannot take it. Hence Jesus' rebuke!

To share our faith by following is our highest call. If we ever got 40% or 60% or, if you can imagine, 75% of the people in this congregation on the same page who said at this altar that they would be loyal to the ministries of our church with their "prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness"—what a wonder it would be! For a moment consider Africanized honey bees, fire ants, or killer microbes. What do they have in common? The answer is that as individuals—single and alone—they are rather trivial. But when several thousand Africanized honey bees, fire ants, or killer microbes act in concert, it is amazing what effect they have. They dish out the

agony. Our church possesses this kind of potential, not for pain, but rather for the good of God's kingdom. Yet, we need Jesus' spirit to unite our efforts. The gap between our promise and our performance is colossal.

Mark suggests there is an existential world of difference between Jesus' two questions asked of followers: "Who do people say that I am?" and "But who do you say that I am?" Between these questions are other questions that every professing follower of Christ faces: "Who is Jesus?" "Is Jesus really the Lord of my life?" "Am I truly a follower of Christ and a disciple and learner?"

I had a friend, an associate pastor at FUMC, Dallas, whose name was Wally Chappell. A couple of decades ago, Wally found himself in something of a quandary as the Chair of the board of a local Dallas non-profit charity. Because money for non-profits always seems scarce, Wally decided to do something drastic. He decided to garner pledges for a bike ride. But this was no ordinary bike ride. No, for Wally Chappell at the age of 71 years decided to get pledges for a bike ride from FUMC Dallas, Texas to FUMC Gunnison, Colorado—a distance of some 842 miles.

Wally vigilantly recorded his life in a spiritual journal—like John Wesley. Over and over, Wally wrote in his journal: "Why am I doing this?" "Why am I doing this?" "Why am I doing this?" I am sure it was a question that haunted him each mile of the 842-mile trip. Yet, if you read Wally's journal, then you would discover his answer to his own question, "Why am I doing this?" in a single four-word sentence—"Christians do their talk."

To be an authentic follower of Jesus, we not only confess Jesus with our lips. We follow Jesus with our lives—our time and treasure and devotion. Amen.

P. S. Jesus is trying to develop followers. The best way to follow Jesus is to be obedient to Jesus and love the things that Jesus loved. We all follow something, but if we stake our lives to what we follow, then make sure it is worthy of your life. We all follow something, so chose carefully what you are willing to put your life behind.