

Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 12, 2019
Church of the Holy Cross
The Rev. Jamie Samilio

Acts 9:36-43 -- Revelation 7:9-17 -- John 10:22-30 -- Psalm 23

Follow Me

What does it mean to follow? To follow means to come after someone, to move behind in the same direction. Have you ever met up with a group of people at one place, and then had to caravan to another venue? This often happens at weddings and out of town events where someone local leads others to the next event. Have you ever been following someone and had them blow through yellow lights, leaving you at a red light, watching as a dozen cars get between you and the car you are following? I had that happen more than once, where I have been left to fend for myself to find the destination. Or have you ever been the lead car and had to pull over because the car following you is going 10 miles below the speed limit and keeps missing the lights? It is a tricky business this leading and following. When we follow someone on a journey, we have to pay close attention, especially if we do not know precisely where we are going, how long the journey will take, or even what the final destination might be. We have to look for signs along the way, and often, if we stop paying attention or fail to keep up, we can get lost—even to the point of stopping to regroup and find our way back to the leader. Sometimes, however, we just give up and go back to where we started—at least we are someplace familiar. We may not be lost, but we are also not where we were meant to be. The leader has a responsibility to watch out for those following along. The leader needs to anticipate obstacles, and sometimes to slow down, wait, or even turn back and find where the follower got lost. Jesus is the one we are following. Jesus is the kind of leader who will literally turn around and find us when we get lost. The sound of His voice can cut through the din of the noise that surrounds us, it is a frequency that rings of truth, life and love. We know the voice, and we do our best to follow it. Yet, we get distracted, turn up the radio and drift off course. It is tricky, this following thing, and our attention spans get shorter the more complicated life becomes. We get impatient, “Are we there yet?” And, we want to know the details, we want the map, but it takes a leap of faith to just follow someone. Squirrel! We are so easily distracted...

The scriptures today have a common theme running through them. It is one of protection, of having faith that we will be protected, led to pools of still water, fearing no evil, and comforted. If we follow Jesus, then goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. In Hebrew the word for “follow” is “radaph,” and it means chase after or pursue—goodness and mercy will relentlessly pursue us all the days of our lives and into the hereafter. But it is tricky, and we are easily distracted. Our faith compels us to keep trying, to pay attention, to listen for His voice, see the signs, and to stay close trusting that we are protected and mercy pursues us.

In the Gospel, Jesus is walking through the portico of Solomon in the temple. It is an area protected from the elements—a safe place to walk. He is approached by a group of Jews who want to know if he is the Messiah, if He is the one they are to follow. Now Jesus had been teaching in the temple day after day, he had healed the sick, restored sight to the blind, and raised people from the dead. Jesus’ words were powerful, His miracles bonafide—He was the real deal, but these people wanted the details, to see the map upfront. They could not believe or let go of their preconceived notion of their image of the Messiah. How would you feel if you were expecting to meet a superhero, and instead are greeted by a carpenter hanging out with a group of fishermen? This Gospel is about trusting God and ourselves, and then, with confidence following Jesus, and leading others to follow as well.

We have a superhero carpenter in the temple, and the words He speaks of the scriptures ring clear with truth, life, and love. We hear the words of Jesus, and we know that we are being spoken to by God Himself. Love one another! We see the impossible healing of the lame and blind before our very eyes—these were not cheap magic tricks of an alchemist, these were miracles that defied the laws of nature and had power over death—the words and actions of Jesus were nothing this group in the temple had ever heard or experienced. Yet, they did not trust Jesus, they did not trust their own ears or their own eyes. They were focused on their world, and missed the—they were lost. Confused, looking for an advantage, they missed the big picture.

Several years ago, Sylvia and I went to Italy. We got in line to tour the Vatican—Sylvia was excited to see the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The crowds were large and overwhelming, and we were making our way through the people to see the ceiling. We began walking faster to try and get to places where there were some breaks in the crowd. I was following Sylvia as she passed through the doorway into the Sistine Chapel, but she never looked up. Walking briskly, dodging person after person, she was making her way through the room. I was trying to catch up, but several people had wondered between us. We were moving quickly and Sylvia was aimed directly at the exit. I managed to get close enough for her to hear my voice, “Sylvia, stop, look up!” Sylvia was so focused on getting through the crowd she completely missed the fact that we had arrived where we wanted to be. We looked up together and found ourselves directly below the image of God and Adam reaching to each other in the cloud. We were in an awesome and magnificent place, and we almost missed it having been focused only on what was directly in front of us. We stopped looking for signs, listening to directions, and just plowed ahead. Truly leading and following is tricky business, and faith, trust, and staying awake and aware are not to be taken for granted, if we are to end up where we belong.

It is Good Shepherd Sunday and it is also Mother’s Day. Recognizing the voice of your shepherd, or your person you follow is a natural thing. We recognize and obey the voices of those in our lives who are in authority, like our mothers or others whose examples we follow. We recognize the voice of Jesus, when we hear truth, life, and love in the words spoken. While we follow Jesus, we need to be aware that other people follow us as well. Sometimes, we are unaware that we are leading people until we turn around and see them following us—that is what sheep do, they follow along in a pack. When we are in a flock formation those in ear shot of the shepherd help others on the right path, but this means just following along, and not paying attention to the shepherd’s voice ourselves can lead us astray. What we say and what we do matters and has an impact on those following us. We need to trust our ears and adjust when those we follow are not hearing the voice of our shepherd.

While not all of us are mothers, children still follow our lead. Responsible leading requires slowing down so little legs can catch up, making unscheduled stops to explain some things. Sometimes you have to carry followers when they become weary, and find those who get lost. We are made in the image of God, and following Jesus as others follow us, means remembering to love each other and respect the dignity of all people. Once you commit to following Jesus, nothing can snatch you away. You are protected, loved, and a member of the flock. Following does not mean we will not run into a few wolves on our journey—there will be challenges on every path taken. But if you are following Jesus, you will not meet those challenges alone. We are individuals, made in the image of God, sisters and brothers through Christ, and members of the flock of the Good Shepherd. Each of our names is called individually, ultimately our minds and our spirits are our own, and we are all unique children of God. Kahlil Gibran wrote a poem about children, and I want to share it with you on this day, as fellow children of God—led, protected, and loved.

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.
You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

We are all God's children through Christ, and we are of one flock on this journey together. Listen for the voice of truth, life, and love. Stay awake, listen, and look for signs. Wait up for those lagging behind, respect the dignity of all people, and have confidence that you are loved and not alone. Whoever you are and wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here, just as you are to receive God's love freely given. Amen.