

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Are we Christians by a label we call ourselves....or are we Christians by who we are in our hearts? Disciples of Jesus....or members of a nice, tidy, traditional club of privileged dinosaurs?

Early on, Jesus chose twelve people to go with him into the future. They were going to be leaders, proclaiming good news and preaching in front of crowds of people. And the early days of ministry were wildly successful...feeding thousands, healing sick people, winning debates against critics. It was all very, very cool...very heady stuff.

And then one day, Jesus made a sharp right turn. In just a few verses before the ones chosen for today, he asked the disciples if they had figured out who he was. After a few guesses, Peter identified Jesus as the Son of God. It was a powerful, holy moment. But in his very next words, Jesus told them that he was on his way to Jerusalem to die. “Die?” Peter says. “Die? You’re not going to die! The party’s just getting started!”

It was then that Jesus offered them a three-fold standard for leadership. “If you are going to be leaders” Jesus tells them, “then you must deny yourself, take up the cross, and follow.” It all seemed so backwards to them, that they should have to deny themselves (whatever that meant), and take up a cross (they knew exactly what that meant!), and to be followers. And yet, this is precisely what Jesus expected of them....that they would deny themselves, that they would set aside their own selfish wants and wishes, and pursue what was best for the group. And when Jesus spoke of the cross, they learned that being a disciple would mean hardship, and sacrifice, and possibly even death. And finally, the disciples learned that Jesus wanted them to follow him...to imitate him...to love the people that he loved, and to trust the God that he trusted.

Understanding for them did not begin until after the Resurrection...that to be in his company, he requires people to set aside their personal agendas, and to be willing to live life like him, because this life is not the end. When Jesus rose from the dead, it all made sense to the disciples. In fact, that three-fold standard — self-denial, taking up a cross, and following Jesus —became the way they lived...and the way they died. Every one of them.

But what about us...2000 years removed from his words that day? What would Jesus say to us about what he expects from Christian people? Nothing different, really...but what does it mean?

What does it mean to deny oneself? Does it mean that we leave home and family and

friends and occupation in order to be a disciple? Drop everything and go on mission in deepest Africa? Not necessarily. But it does suggest that we leave our baggage behind, that we leave behind our insistence that it is our way or the highway. That is what “denying oneself” means, and it goes against the grain of this present culture.

There is a need for conformity. There is a need to leave our personal wants and wishes at the door, and to work together. That is what it means to “deny oneself” in our day. In fact, Jesus called the Church “a body.” Only when the body is working together toward a common goal is the body functioning properly.

Jesus also told his disciples that they must take up a cross. For you and I, in this day and age, having a “cross to bear” has a completely different meaning. Frankly, I deeply dislike that phrase because of its gross dissimilarity to the reality of that time. In the first century, crosses were used by the Romans for one thing only: a shameful death by slow, torturous, agonizing suffocation. Un-numbered rebellious Jews were hung on crosses along the roads of Palestine, so these disciples had a very clear image of what Jesus meant: there will be hardship for you.

If we take our faith seriously, we will be called to make difficult choices. Some people will reject us...including our family. We may even be persecuted. In 2018, here in the U.S., we may never have to die for our faith, but ask yourself these questions: Do the people at work, or at school, or in your neighborhood know about your faith? Or do you hide that simple fact for fear that, if they knew, it would change the way they treat you? If that is the greatest cross you are bearing in your Christian life, then be thankful because there are others in this world who, if they admit to being followers of Jesus, will lose their home, their job, maybe their life. And still, they profess their faith.

Finally, Jesus says that we are to follow him. Does that mean that we are to follow...or are we supposed to FOLLOW? If you pay any attention to major league professional baseball, you know that the teams are entering “spring training”. But, come late summer, your favorite team may be in a pennant race. Every game they win or lose will have an impact at the end of the season, and will attract a lot of attention. You may meet, or already know somebody who follows the same team which, in a pennant race, means that they tune in for the pre-game show and study the lineups. They watch every pitch of every inning of every game. They read the box score the next morning in the paper so that they thoroughly comprehend everything that happened between the lines. The word “fan” comes from the root word “fanatic” and this illustrates why.

So, do we follow Jesus in this manner? Do we study scripture to learn who Jesus was, and what he did, and all that he said? Have we read the Old Testament to understand what the prophets said of him hundreds of years before his birth? And read books to understand what scholars have

said about Jesus in the centuries since his death? This may be what it means to “follow” Jesus. And if we did all of this, would our world call you a “fan” or would you be a “fanatic?”

But maybe “to follow” means to imitate him, to mimic him, to try to be like him in everything you say and do in this world. When it comes to loving people, or being fair in business, or being courageous when it comes to defending the weak; in all of this, we try to follow Jesus. The way to understand this is to recognize a basic truth: If we are followers of Jesus..disciples of his in more than label only..then we must follow in the way of his leadership. And, in marking the season of Lent...it is NOT in giving up something...not chocolate, or meat, or whatever.

But rather we follow Jesus by giving IN....giving in to God. Giving up ourselves, denying ourselves. Saying to God that we give ourselves to God to be made into the persons that God would have us become.

If that sounds more like a revivalist or fundamentalist message than Episcopalian might suggest a failure or weakness in the mission of the church to those seeking spiritual wholeness in this life journey. But it is true to the gospel and message of our Lord Jesus Christ. The fact is that, in the faith journey of our lives, neither you or I have it all figured out. I wander, and wonder just as much as anyone without a flashlight in the dark. But that is ok, because I signed up...not to be a leader, but a follower....a follower of the one who IS the light.

And I pray the same is for you...following the Christ who leads us here and to the other side, in the loving name of the Trinity, as the Father, and as the Son and as the Holy Spirit.

Amen.