

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent February 28, 2021

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Some people are born leaders but most of us are followers. We admire and follow people with authority, fame, fortune and influence. For example, former President Barack Obama has the most followers on social media. Our first Black president has 129 million followers on Twitters.

The next three “leaders” are all famous pop singers/ musicians – Justin Beiber with 113 million, Katy Perry with 109 million and Rihanna with 101 million followers on Twitter. You may not know Justin, Katy or Rihanna or ever heard about them, but the truth is each of us has some one we look up to, admire and emulate so much as to follow him or her in our daily lives.

That begs the question. Are you a follower of Jesus?

In the Gospel for the second Sunday in Lent, Jesus tells the disciples: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” That statement actually appears in three of the synoptic gospels: Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; and Luke 9:23.

So, what did Jesus really mean by that statement: “Take-up their cross and follow me.” Before I answer that question, let’s begin with what Jesus did NOT mean. Many people interpret “cross” as some kind of a burden or sickness such like cancer or Covid-19. But that’s not what Jesus meant when He said, “Take up your cross and follow Me.”

When Jesus carried His cross up Golgotha to be crucified, no one was thinking of the cross as a burden to carry.

In the first-century, the cross meant death by the most painful and humiliating means possible. Because the Roman soldiers forced convicted criminals to carry their own crosses to the place of crucifixion, bearing a cross meant carrying their own execution device while facing ridicule along the way to death.

Today, we Christians see the cross as a cherished symbol of atonement, forgiveness, grace, and love. Therefore, “Take up your cross and follow Me” means being willing to die in order to follow Jesus. This is called “dying to self.” It’s a call to absolute surrender.

Notice that each time Jesus commanded bearing our cross, He said, “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. For what will it profit them to gain

the whole world and forfeit their life?" Indeed what will what can they give in return for their life?"

You may remember that wherever Jesus went while on this earth, crowds of people followed him. And although these multitudes often followed Him as the Messiah, their view of who the Messiah really was — and what He would do — was distorted.

We saw this kind of false and misleading view of the messiah among the followers of Jim Jones, the 43-year old American cult leader who proclaimed himself messiah and promised his followers a utopia in the jungles of South America. Eventually, Jim Jones led about 900 of his followers to a murder suicide at a compound in Guyana that he called Jamestown.

My friends, following Jesus requires self-denial and taking up your cross, NOT murder or suicide! Discipleship demands sacrifice, and through out the Scriptures, Jesus never hid the true cost of discipleship.

How many of us would be willing to answer the call, "Come follow Jesus, and you may face the loss of friends, family, reputation, career, and possibly even your life"? Such a call is what Jesus meant when He said, "Take up your cross and follow Me."

So let me ask again: Are you a follower of Jesus? When that question is asked, people generally give a wide variety of answers. They may think it's synonymous with believing in God, attending church, taking communion, giving to good causes, praying when in need, living a good life, or being religious. But none of these actually answer the question, nor do they prove that someone is following Jesus. Engaging in certain religious activities is not equivalent to following Jesus. Although these activities are generally practiced by Christians, not everyone who does them is a Christian. To determine if we are truly following Jesus, we must use guidelines from the Bible.

The first qualification is in John 3:3 "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). We must be born again, that is, we must confess and repent of our sins, by faith receive God's forgiveness, surrender our lives to Christ as our Savior and Lord, and start walking in His ways.

The second requirement is to be a person of prayer. That's what Jesus was. He was always praying, and if we follow Jesus, we will be a person of prayer just as He was. In fact, prayer will be a major part of our lives, not just an occasional plea for help when we're in need. For prayer to become a priority, we must make it a daily habit to have a quiet time alone with God Starting and finishing each day in prayer is a good way to make sure we are walking in Christ's footsteps.

Another requirement is to have faith and believe in God. We read in John 3:16, . "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." Just as we trust

Jesus for salvation, so we must continue to live by faith as we follow Him. If we don't believe Him, we'll live self-centered lives and won't do what He says or walk in His ways. But as faithful followers of Christ, we'll trust Him with our difficulties, pain, temptations, and needs, relying on Him to enable us to do whatever He says in God's holy Word.

Another requirement is to be obedient. Following Jesus requires obedience, especially obeying the two great commandments to love God and to love our neighbor. And loving our neighbor requires service. Jesus commands us in John 12:26, "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him" (John 12:26). Jesus came as a servant, and as His followers, that's what we should be also.

All of us have the capacity to serve the Lord in some fashion by serving others. Service comes in many different forms: helping, caring, encouraging, comforting, giving, teaching, or sharing God's Word. I was reminded of that by a Christmas gift I received from Andrea Rizutto. It is a beautiful coffee mug with the inscription: "Deacon = Servant's Heart" "To serve me, you must follow me and you will be honored by the Father." (John 12:26)

My friends, are you a follower of Christ? If you are wondering right now if you are ready to take up your cross, consider these questions:

Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means losing some of your closest friends?

Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means alienation from your family?

Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means the loss of your reputation?

Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means losing your job?

Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means losing your life?

Following Jesus doesn't necessarily mean all these things will happen to you, but are you willing to take up your cross? If there comes a time in your life when you are faced with a choice —Jesus or the comforts of this life —which will you choose?

Commitment to Christ means self-denial, giving up your hopes, dreams, possessions, even your very life if need be for the cause of Christ. Only if you willingly take up your cross will you be called His disciple. To be a faithful follower of Jesus, we must emulate Him, who proclaimed in Luke 22:27, "I am among you as one who serves"

In another instance Jesus teaches that if a follower wants to be great, then that follower needs to take the position of a servant. That's one of the reasons I was ordained Deacon: to follow Jesus, the master servant. And in the nearly two decades I have been a deacon, I have found out that each day I really love being a deacon. It reminds me that in serving all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely I am serving Jesus, whom I worship as my Lord and Savior.

As we come to the end of the annual celebration of Black History Month, we must remember that the faithful followers of Jesus throughout our history worshiped Christ regardless of circumstances, trials and tribulations they may face. During slavery, black people continued to praise and worship God. Many of their songs, prayers and even dance became worship because they had faith in Jesus and believed God was with them and would never leave nor forsake them.

As descendants who share the faith of those believers, we must always “Lift every voice and sing; Till earth and heaven ring. Ring with the harmonies of Liberty. Let our rejoicing rise High as the listening skies; Let it resound loud as the rolling sea. Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us. Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us. Facing the rising sun of our new day begun. Let us march on till victory is won.” AMEN.