

Being a follower is not something encouraged in America.

No Commencement speaker ever challenged those graduating to be "The Followers of Tomorrow."

No films or books have ever been written about the contributions of the Great World Followers.

No one writes their resume or another's eulogy to highlight when they demonstrated skills in following.

No one's heart swells with pride when others commend your Grandchild for being A Real Follower.

When I candidated to become your pastor at Valley Presbyterian Church two years ago, several persons described our congregation as composed of FIPs: Formerly Important People, which I guess is better than the acronym for Retired Important People, RIP. The problem being that after leading your own company, after being Elected to Government, a Teacher or CEO, after having people listen to you, Former Leaders have a hard time remembering how to Follow. The Church Information Form went so far as to identify "Our Pastor needs to be a Self-Differentiated Leader," meaning you yourself need to have a thick enough skin to Lead Differently when everyone around you knows better.

I believe Reflection on "Successful Leaders Following" is exactly the point the Gospel of Mark is trying to make. This never occurred to me before, which I can find nothing about from all the scholars. There was a time in which there were Books of the Old Testament considered PROHIBITED that only "Learned Men of Advanced Age were allowed to read. This morning is about unpacking a Question, for believers like ourselves, LEADERS experienced with life, who understand human nature, economies, world affairs, and business. This passage is not for neophytes, or new believers, this passage is for FORMER LEADERS who have wrestled with life, morals, ethics, to question everything anew through Christian Faith.

On this day, walking along the road to Caesarea Philippi (indicating NOT A Jewish town, but a City of the Greco-Roman World), Jesus questioned IF The World, if Jesus' Disciples, and if We the Readers: Were Yet Ready to Understand?

The Word Disciples means Students, and their name for Jesus: Rabbi means Teacher, so Jesus offers a Quiz.

At the beginning of Mark, the Heavens Opened and God named "This is my Beloved Son! I AM Pleased!" In the 16th Chapter, Jesus dies at the Crucifixion, a Centurion exclaims "Surely, this was the Son of God!" So here at the end of Chapter 8, Jesus asks his inner circle of students, asks US: "Who do you think I Am?"

HOWEVER remember back in the 6th Chapter, Jesus came back home to his own community and family, who refused to trust him/to believe. So Jesus sent his disciples out into the world to lead others: Praying, preaching, teaching, healing, fighting the demons of this world. And the most understated miracle of the Bible happened: Jesus' Followers did as he told them! They went out in pairs, and took on the world! Then these 12 returned to Jesus with 5000 of their followers who even by hunger and lonely places would not be deterred from hearing Jesus. Following which, Jesus and the 12 go to Tyre and Sidon and the region of the Decapolis, where their work has gathered another 4000 followers. No longer is this the story of a Galilean Carpenter who got No Respect from his family, or his 12 fishermen, this is now a story of people like us, they have been successful Leaders: apostles, evangelists, miracle workers, who took on the world; who 20 Centuries before Facebook and Twitter already have at least 9000 followers.

To these successful Former Leaders, he asks THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION OF THE BIBLE?

This is not our Green Valley introductory Question of Where are you from, Mich., Minn., Iowa or NY? Jesus' Quiz is not a True/False or multiple Guess. His one Question Quiz requires Experienced Persons to use everything they know, from life before Jesus, from their Jewish Faith, from Jesus' Teachings and Miracles, from their Leadership experiences in the world, to trigger a conclusion like "This is My SON! Or This IS The Son of God!"

Having not used the Friendship Pads in 18 months, our Custodian Bob came to me saying "I find only 16 Books and there are 34 pews, what do you want to do?" I replied "At the start of COVID, there used to be a box with all the cards you took out of the pews" and he said "Ohhh, I knew where to look!" That is the response Jesus is looking for here. For anyone familiar with the Torah, the books of Moses, anyone Jewish, Judaism's most ancient memory was As Slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, God called to Moses from the Burning Bush, promising to PASSOVER And Save Israel, at which God gave Israel a Sacred name for God's Identity: I AM! Therefore in that one question

FIRST, Jesus is saying to his 12 Former Leaders and their 9000 Followers "Do you recognize God in what we are doing?" "Who do you think God Is?" "What do you think God is?"

SECOND, instead of telling them the answer, Jesus asks, "WHO DOES THE WORLD COMPARE JESUS TO?" There are lots of identities the church has claimed for Jesus over time: A Man, Messiah, Messenger from God, The next Moses, King David, Elijah, Suffering Servant, John the Baptist, the 2nd Adam, Lord of Lords and King of Kings...

Finally Jesus, asks these who had had a professional life marketing the teachings of Jesus: "Who do you say I AM?" And with his making that connection "I AM" with "What am I to you?" Peter makes this enormous leap of faith: "You Are the Christ!"

Except, THE CHRIST has come to mean a great deal more to us. At that time the word Christ meant "Savior"

We can always count on Jesus to turn everything on its head. Jesus begins revelation that to be The Christ, ALSO means all of those things described in Isaiah 50 about God's Suffering Servant. This is a very different kind of FOLLOWING. Not trying to win. Not trying to succeed. Living Out whatever may be necessary, not as we want, but as is needed. Simon Peter imagined for a moment: Jesus is God's Holy Messenger, perhaps even God's Son; but Jesus then had Peter witness being the Christ also means being the Son of Man; what had been claimed as Election as God's People, can just as readily mean the Example God will use for others to witness God's suffering.

Our Nation, our world, is at a catharsis. On the one hand there are the historic examples of Jeff Bezos building Amazon and going into Space, Mark Zuckerberg with Facebook, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, we could go on and on naming famous persons who made Trillions of Dollars.

On the other hand, there are the Abraham Lincoln, John Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr.s, Elizabeth Caty Stanton and Sojourner Truths who fought for and were killed for the human rights of others. Which are the Heroes we want to emulate? If you were to have a dinner party, whom would you most want to sit next to?

Taking up the Cross to Follow Jesus, is not about caring for a family member, or bearing with addictions. Taking Up the Cross of Jesus at this point in life is not a naïve following, but a Choice based on Reflection, going where we never intended to go, but cannot neglect following. Taking Up the Cross is resolving ethical dilemmas not because it is reasonable or profitable, but because you feel God has you by the scruff of the neck and can do no other.

At one point I interviewed a group of Former Leaders, asking what had been the most important decision of their lives.

One described having been an Executive at Johnson & Johnson, when someone began poisoning bottles of Tylenol on the shelves before sale. He was the person who was responsible for making the decision to remove all of their product from stores until they could create a new packaging; which revolutionized all packaging, but 12 months later he was let go for having been a whistle-blower.

Another loved photography and began traveling to Mission sites to photograph the people. He

developed a program he called International Design for Economic Awareness: IDEA to take regular folk like us to see that in other parts of the world, we are rich.

What we are describing is that Taking up your Cross to follow Jesus may require using all the experience and wisdom you acquired FORMERLY as a LEADER, no longer changing the world and hopefully will not be the cause of getting you killed... But being so committed to the needs of others as to sacrifice your position and authority, possibly your dignity or reputation to care for others.

This text does not allow for a few good sermon notes to take home after worship. This is a Biblical text intended to move us far beyond information learned in a Bible Study, to commitment of our lives. WHO IS GOD IN YOUR LIFE? WHO IS JESUS? WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES HIS PRESENCE IN YOUR LIFE MAKE? HOW CAN YOU USE ALL THAT YOU LEARNED FORMERLY IN LEADERSHIP TO FOLLOW JESUS?