

Lectionary 22 A
WHERE JESUS LEADS HIS FOLLOWERS

September 3, 2023
Matthew 16:21-28

Where does Jesus lead us, his followers? We've learned *how* he leads us since ascending back up to heaven – through his Word. We need to listen to what he says in the Word to know where he might lead us.

Jesus is going to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was where Jesus' enemies were. That was the center of the forces working against Jesus – the Pharisees, the Scribes, the Priests, and the Roman officials.

Jesus leads to our enemies. (Our text next week centers on that theme. You'll need to return to hear more about that.) Usually we don't even want to be around people we don't like, even if they aren't enemies.

I had a friend on Facebook, block me. Apparently, she didn't like some things I had written. She no longer showed up as a friend. Her name didn't appear in Messenger. I couldn't contact her even if I wanted to through Facebook. I checked with a mutual friend. She was still friends with her on Facebook. That meant that she hadn't left Facebook. Apparently, she didn't want anything to do with me.

I didn't let that stop me, I went to their home and visited them. It was a good visit. When mutual friends came to town, we all went to visit. It was a good visit. We're friends again on Facebook.

Having different opinions doesn't mean we have to become enemies. That used to be true of politicians. It's true with lawyers – the argue with each other in court, then go out for drinks afterwards. Athletes may be opponents during the game, but friends otherwise. Who knows? Next season they could be on the same time.

I've seen that happen in my short time here. Different opinions were expressed in a meeting, but they weren't attacking their opponents. The goal on both sides was to make the best decision for this congregation – and that's what happened.

Going to people we have disagreements with can result in further pain and animosity; but it's also the only way that differences can be aired, problems worked out. Relationships restored. Better decisions made.

One of the most significant memes I've read on Facebook in a long time, which I also posted in a newsletter article, said: "Christianity is not about how much you love Jesus; it's about how much you love Judas." What really distinguishes Christians from other folks is how we treat our enemies. Jesus went to them. Jesus died for them – including us. Jesus told us: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Anybody can love their friends and the people who agree with them. Following Jesus means doing more than that. Jesus did more than that.

When Jesus was arrested, Peter denied knowing him. All the disciples deserted him and fled. (The same Greek for "deserted" is used for "divorce," but also "forgive." More about that next week. You'll need to come back.) Anyway, Jesus own disciples, his select Twelve, failed to follow him. In Matthew, none of the disciples witness Jesus' death on the cross nor his burial. Only some women. Yet, after the resurrection, Jesus goes to his disciples. He won't let their failures nor his death, keep him from going to them to reestablish his loving relationship with them.

Jesus comes to us, even when we have failed to follow him. He comes to us today in his

Word. He comes to us today in this sacrament where he again gives himself to us. He forgives our failures and reestablishes his loving relationship with us

Jesus is going where he knows he will undergo great suffering.

I certainly don't like to go places where I know I will face pain and suffering, yet Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me." For the earliest believers, following Jesus could mean suffering and death. Not so much for us today.

However, carrying the cross through the town brought with it ridicule and condemnation from the town's people. There was emotional pain connected with carrying a cross. We don't suffer that too much today either.

Where we can suffer pain is in loving others. Becoming vulnerable means that we risk being hurt by others. They may reject our love, and that is painful. They may betray our trust, and that is painful. If we seek to avoid such pains in our lives by never reaching out to others, we lose our lives. By trying to save our lives from pain, we lose our lives. We also lose out on the love we could have shared and received from others.

However, we need to be careful that if people reject us, it's because we are honestly trying to help them; and not because we are being jerks. There are some people who seek persecution to show how well they are following Christ. I don't believe that's what Jesus wants from us.

When people seek to follow Jesus, he leads us into the pain and suffering that comes from truly loving other people – risking rejection.

Jesus says, "I must go and be put to death."

I'm sure that at this point I would react like Peter did. We would try and stop our beloved leader from sacrificing his life. Jesus is going where we don't want to go and where we don't want him to go. But he keeps going and says, "Follow me."

For the early believers, following Jesus could mean an early death. They were seen as threats to the Roman Empire. They wouldn't worship the emperor as a god. They wouldn't worship the Roman and Greek gods like good citizens should do. Those believers were willing to be put to death rather than worship these false gods.

We don't face such oppositions to following Jesus. At the same time, Martin Luther talked about the need for Christians to die daily – a daily baptism – daily repentance. Every day we need to die to ourselves.

To put that in simple terms, dying to self means admitting "I can't." Too often we view repentance as an "I can" experience. "I am sorry for my sins. I *can* do better. I *can* try harder. I *can* please you, God." That is not dying to the self. It's keeping the self in control of my life. Such sentences are still centered on me, what I *can* do – or at least try to do.

Repentance that is dying to self, recognizes that I *can't* do any better. I *can't* try any harder. My self is not capable of doing any better. Confessing, "I *can't*" is giving up control. It's drowning the self in baptism. It also comes with believing, God can. God can raise us up to a new life. God can wipe away all those past mistakes to give me a new start – a new birth – today.

Every day we find our sinful selves thinking and saying and doing things we know we shouldn't be thinking, saying, or doing. We find ourselves **not** wanting to follow where Christ leads. We'd like to run away, like the disciples did. We avoid people who might cause us pain or disagree with us. We can be reluctant to forgive others – and especially ourselves. We don't always work for reconciliation. We insist on doing it my way, rather than consider the other way

might be better. We turn opponents into enemies. We follow our own paths rather than the way of Jesus.

One man used the illustration of taking a shower. Every day he saw it as washing away the dirt and sin in his life. He came out clean and new. Although he also knew that he would get dirty again during the day. There would be another shower in the morning – a cleansing and renewing. That's like our daily baptism.

Where does Jesus go? On the third day he is raised to life. Following Jesus leads to life. Certainly it is life after death; but it's also a better quality of life that we experience here on earth now.

It's a path of forgiving our enemies, rather than seeking to get even. It's a path of making ourselves vulnerable to others through love and care for them – which may bring us great pain – but also great joy. It's a path of denying one's self; that God and others are more important than me. It is reaching out and listening to God and others.

Where Jesus leads his followers will be down paths where we don't always want to go. We will often fail to go Jesus' way; but Jesus continually comes to us. He seeks and finds the lost sheep – and lost people. He comes and leads us in his way – back to our baptisms – our deaths and our resurrections. It's a way that makes us better people. It's a way that makes for a better world for others.

We will fail to follow where Jesus leads, but Jesus promises to come back and put us back on the right pathways. We know that where Jesus leads us is to a glorious future beyond death.