Good Followers

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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In 1934, Sara Pollard applied for admission to Vassar College. In those days, parents had to fill out a questionnaire for their son or daughter applying for college admission. Sara’s father answered the questionnaire honestly. In his estimation, Sara was “more of a follower than a leader.” Vassar accepted Sara, explaining that it already had more than enough leaders. What the college needed was more followers.

No parent these days would describe a son or daughter as a good follower. No siree! It’s all about leadership. Colleges ask their applicants to list their leadership qualifications. With so many natural-born leaders, who is left to follow them?

The glut of leadership seminars is epidemic in our land. Maybe we need a few seminars in teaching people how to follow and contribute when they are not in charge.

Leadership has been over-sold in our day. We need good followers as much as we need good leaders. Maybe the problem with today’s leaders is they do not know how to follow. I am reminded of something Aristotle said, “He who cannot be a good follower cannot be a good leader.”

The focus of today’s sermon is on becoming good followers. Jesus calls people to become good followers.
Luke 9 represents a turning point in Jesus’ ministry. In previous chapters, people have been asking the “who is this” question of Jesus. This time around, Jesus asks it himself. When Jesus has a private audience with his disciples, he asks, “Who do the crowds say I am?” (9:18). Jesus’ reference to the crowds harkens back to the crowd of 5000 Jesus fed with bread and fish.

His disciples repeat what people have been saying about him. “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life” (9:19). The singling out of Elijah is understandable. God transported Elijah to heaven in a chariot and prophets like Malachi imagined Elijah’s return would herald the coming of the promised Messiah (Malachi 4:5).

While Jesus fits the qualifications of a prophet, the middle chapters of Luke’s gospel demonstrate he is more than a prophet. He exercises control over a storm at sea, heals the sick, drives out demons and raises people from the dead.

The second time Jesus asks about his identity, he personalizes his question, “Who do you say that I am?” (9:20). Peter answers correctly, “You are God’s Messiah” (9:20). The Greek word Peter uses for Messiah, *Kristos*, translates as Christ. It is the equivalent of the Hebrew word *Messiah*, meaning the anointed one of God.
In verse 21, Jesus orders his disciples to keep quiet his Messianic mission. This call to secrecy seems an odd request. Does Jesus not want his disciples to share the news of his Messianic mission with people?

Not yet. Messiah was something of a loaded term back in the day. The Jews expected a political Messiah who would liberate Israel from Roman tyranny. In verse 22, Jesus teaches that he will become a suffering Messiah: “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and leaders of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (9:22). Must functions as an adverb in this sentence to modify all four verbs. Must means “of necessity. The Son of Man must suffer, must be rejected, must be killed and must be raised from the dead.

When we speak of Jesus’ ministry, it all comes down to the cross. The cross serves as God’s remedy for human sin. At the cross, there is justice for sin. At the cross, there is mercy for sinners. At the cross, justice and mercy meet as one.

Jesus concludes his teaching by underscoring the importance of following him. “Whoever wants to become my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me” (9:23). In English grammar, we call this verse a chiastic structure. Stay with me now. A chiasmus is a figure of speech in which the first thought in a sentence is reinforced by the last thought. Allow me to illustrate:

A—Whoever wants to become my disciple,
B—Must deny themselves
B—Take up their cross
A—And follow me.
The first and last ideas in the chiasmus play off each other: “Whoever wants to become my disciple” corresponds with “follow me.” The middle two ideas also correlate with each other, that of denying self and taking up the cross. Dying to self and taking up our cross equates to following Jesus.

Taking up your cross is not some burden we carry. I hear people talk about some pain or misfortune as their “cross to bear.” No, taking up our cross is following Jesus. Jesus calls us in this verse to take up our cross daily. Following Jesus is not a one-time decision. Following Jesus is a continual, daily practice.

Let me summarize what Jesus requires of would-be followers in this passage. Verses 18-20 address the matter of Jesus’ identity. Who is Jesus? Answer: He is the Christ, God’s Messiah. Verses 21-22 center on Jesus’ mission. Why did Jesus come? Answer: he came to save us from our sins. Verse 23 focuses on Jesus’ call. What is our response? Answer: our call is to follow him. There you have it: Jesus’ identity as the anointed one of God, his mission to save and his call to follow him.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Our mission at Vienna Presbyterian is Becoming like Christ Together for the World. We sometimes speak of our mission in terms of three commitments—commitment to the person of Christ, commitment to the body of Christ and commitment to the work of Christ.

These three commitments are core to our church. They apply to novices in the faith as they do to seasoned believers.
Our leadership as staff and ordained officers have recommitted ourselves to engaging in these three commitments this year. We are asking you to do the same, as members and regular attenders alike.

Let me talk for a moment about joining our church. We don’t talk much about church membership anymore. If I am a Christ-follower, why do I need to become a member of an organized church? Is it similar to joining a gym?

No! When you join a gym, you agree to pay dues in exchange for goods and services. Joining Vienna Presbyterian does not work this way. It is not about paying dues or keeping a membership roll. It has nothing to do with institutional falderal. We see membership as a shared commitment to the person, body and work of Christ.

The New Testament describes our association as membership in the body of Christ. This membership in the early church is not haphazard or left undefined. In the book of Acts, churches were clearly recognized communities of people who were deeply committed to following Christ together.

What do we ask of you as members? We ask you three commitments.

**Person of Christ**

1. Trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior
2. Practice spiritual disciplines

First, we ask you to commit to the person of Christ. We require everyone who joins this fellowship to profess allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Additionally, we expect that you will engage in spiritual practices like prayer and Bible study to grow in union with Christ.
Second, we ask you to commit to the body of Christ. We grow best in community with other believers. I know, Christians annoy you sometimes, but you are no fun to be around either at times. We expect three things as you live into this first commitment:

1. You will make weekly worship a high priority.
2. You will meet in smaller settings—Bible studies, classes, small groups—to grow closer to Christ.
3. You will foster unity in this church and resolve conflict and disagreements in Biblical ways. This means we will not go around the barn to talk about people behind their backs.

Gossip and backbiting are strictly off limits. If you have a problem with me, come to me.

If I have a problem with you, I come to you. We don’t involve someone else in a problem we are having.

Third, we ask you to commit to the work of Christ in the world. There are three aspects of this third commitment:

1. You will identify and use your spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ and further Christ’s kingdom in the world.
2. You will invest your time and financial resources in the ministry and mission of Christ.
3. You will share boldly in speech and action the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.

If you share these three commitments with us, we invite you to give serious consideration to joining this local body of believers. We will offer three classes on joining this church the Sundays of April 8, 15 and 22 to drill down on what it means to commit to the person, body and work of Christ. If you are unsure if you want to join, fine. Come and check us out. If you cannot attend one or more of these classes, you can take a portion of the class online. We will work with you to identify someone to assist you in how you can make the most of these three commitments.

Here’s the bottom line. We want everyone to take the next step in becoming a fully-devoted followers of Christ. This invitation is relevant for those who are just getting started as well as those who are well down the road.

Some of you have been following Jesus from a comfortable distance. You have been putting off following Christ until tomorrow. I said Christmas Eve that some of you are only one life-altering event from wishing you had given this invitation more serious consideration.

Take the challenge. Become a real follower. Not a Sunday-only, pretend type of Christian, but the real deal, a true believer. Whatever you ask, whatever it takes, I will follow.