

“The First Follower”

Luke 9:51-62

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Katie Owen Aumann on Sunday, June 26th
at Howard Memorial Presbyterian Church in Tarboro, NC

There was a knock on the office door and a student peered her head into my office with a distressed look on her face. She'd come from the career center where she was told that she needed to work on her resume in order to get a summer internship and she needed to create a section on her resume called “leadership experience.” In it, she was to outline every leadership position she's had at Duke. “Was she President of a club?” the career counselor had asked her. No, although she participated in several. “Well then think about places where you've been a leader and give it a title so you can put it on your resume.”

She looked at me confused and anxious. She, like many college students I see, was caught between wanting to advance her career to get the flashy job and having time for the liberal arts education that allows her to explore her passions and interests and the person she wants to become. Should she tend to the friend who was having an existential crisis at 11pm on the night before her econ midterm? Or should she dismiss her friend to study? Should she sign up for yet another club because this one might lead to a titled position or should she leave space in her calendar to have time for dinner with friends on campus? She got to Duke by playing the game—good grades, extra curriculars, strong SAT scores, leadership positions—but now she wasn't so sure that she liked the game at all...or that it was even healthy for her.

I wish I could say that her story is unique. In a segment on college admissions in *The Atlantic*, they explored these questions of leadership. Having analyzed a number of top universities admissions processes, they noted that leadership was a requirement for admission to them all. They wrote, “It's possible, of course, to understand ‘leadership,’ as conceived in the college admissions process, as a broad church of qualities: encompassing a whole host of attributes desirable in bright, motivated teenagers...But...the tacit assumption is that leadership, like ‘maturity,’ or ‘concern for others,’ needs no qualification of explanation; it is not only *de facto* desirable but indeed essential. To be a ‘contributor’...to a chess club is to be merely average; to be president of that chess club, by contrast, is to display some intangible merit.”¹ As the student sat in my office in tears, I found myself reflecting on our culture's emphasis on leadership. The trickle down effect of these demands leads parents to obsess not only about what college their child will be able to get into but whether or not they're sending their kid to the best pre-school. And the students who survive college with an intact sense of self enter a workforce with performance evaluations requiring one to demonstrate leadership in order to advance their career.

More ink and energy has been spilt in recent years trying to figure out what the silver bullet to leadership is and how to train people in these seemingly elusive and undefined X factors that a true leader will possess. Everyone from Duke to Harvard, from business schools to

¹ Burton, Tara Isabella. “Why are American Colleges Obsessed with Leadership?” *The Atlantic*. 22 Jan 2014.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/01/why-are-american-colleges-obsessed-with-leadership/283253/>

divinity schools, is building “leadership institutes” to train the curious and willing to become the next class of leaders. Companies spend almost 14 billion dollars annually on leadership training seminars, many of which are painstakingly boring, in my limited experience.²

Elizabeth Samet, a professor of English at West Point has a unique perspective as she studies leadership. She observes, “If we live in a world of crisis...we also live in a world that romanticizes crisis—that finds in it fodder for an addiction to the twenty-four-hour news cycle, multiple information streams, and constant stimulation.”³ Samet believes that our growing addiction to the narrative of crisis has gone hand in hand with an increasing veneration of leadership—a veneration that leaves us vulnerable to “the false prophets, the smooth operators, the gangsters, and the demagogues” who say they can save us.⁴

Certainly the political climate at home and abroad seems to be operating under the belief that if we just find the right leader with the right qualities and the right intangible leadership skills, we’ll be saved. The terms “messiah” and “savior” get put on emerging leaders and those seeking positions of power because we are all desperate for someone to show us the way forward. And when one fails, we are quick to blame the leader but unquestioning in the assumption that if they had possessed the right leadership skills, such disaster would not have befallen us. As stock markets plummeted this week after the Brexit vote for Britain to leave the EU, the media immediately began looking for a scapegoat, and David Cameron’s actions and subsequent resignation are being reported as a failure of leadership. With national and international anxiety, the world seems to be looking around for the right leader to deliver us.

And then Jesus enters today’s text and turns the whole conversation about leadership on its head. Because the leader whom we do call Messiah and Savior stands with his face toward Jerusalem and calls us not become leaders but instead to explore a different and highly underdeveloped, unexplored aspect of our life and faith: being a follower.

I understand that in today’s culture this is not the ideal we strive for when we wake up in the morning. When you’re graduating from 8th grade and someone asks you what you want to be when you grow up, children are trained to pick positions of authority and accomplishment. Can you imagine the mortified look on a parent’s face if their child said, “When I grow up, I want to be a follower!”

And yet, the core aspect of our faith, the core way that we define ourselves as Christians is as disciples—the Latin root of which is *discipulus* meaning student or follower. The early Christians in the book of Acts referred to themselves as Followers of the Way. To be a disciple of Jesus means to embody that which is countercultural today. And to be a disciple of Jesus might just be harder than we think.

² Rothman, Joshua. “Shut up and Sit Down.” *The New Yorker*. 29 Feb 2016. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/29/our-dangerous-leadership-obsession>

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

We gather together as disciples because we believe God has been revealed to us in the perfect leader, Jesus the Christ. So it would be easy for us to say that all we need to do to master leadership and succeed in today's society is to unpack Jesus' leadership qualities and model him. But perhaps Jesus isn't trying to fit all the criteria in the leadership books or offering us a formulaic ten-step solution for how to be leaders ourselves. Perhaps instead today's text is really about Jesus teaching us what it looks like to be a *follower* by embodying discipleship himself in his relationship with God.

As we enter today's text, there is a critical shift that is happening in Luke's Gospel. Just prior to today's passage, Jesus has foretold his death and resurrection not once but twice and the disciples are clueless. He has declared, "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). And though the cost is laid before them, the disciples seem to struggle to understand just what is required to be a follower.

And so today's text begins, "When the days were fulfilled for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51). And with new resolve and focus, Jesus' ministry and his tone shifts in an effort to help us understand just what is required to follow. Jesus journey through the next 10 chapters of Luke until his triumphal arrival in Jerusalem takes him back and forth all over the Holy Land. So when Jesus "set his face" toward Jerusalem, Luke seems less concerned about geography and instead invites us to pay attention to Jesus' singularity of focus on being in perfect relationship with God. To set one's face is to place your whole energy and purpose toward one goal. Up until this point in Luke's Gospel, Jesus' ministry has been focused on proclaiming the good news, healing and teaching in Galilee. Now, this seemingly random set of verses tilts the whole gospel narrative in a newly focused direction. We are no longer just concerned with Jesus as a teacher or a healer, we are discovering who Jesus is as Messiah. And with his face pointed toward Jerusalem, the stories that follow all take on a particular focus on discipleship.

So, it's perhaps appropriate at this point in Luke's Gospel that Jesus make it clear that what happens from here, what it means to follow from this point forward, involves some risk and involves deep focus. Jesus is no longer simply foreshadowing his own death and resurrection for others. By setting his face toward Jerusalem, he is fully taking up his call to follow God the Father even to the point of death. And by following that call placed on his own life as God's Son, Jesus shows us what it looks like and what it costs to be a follower, a disciple, ourselves.

Through an encounter with three unnamed characters on the road, Jesus unpacks just what being a follower requires. Each wants to follow and yet, each tries to place some stipulations on that call, proving their wills stand in the way of their ability to follow faithfully. The first follower boldly declares, "I will follow you," in an act of blind following that sounds easy, to which Jesus points out that following has a cost—a loss of what we know as home. To the second, Jesus says, "Follow me." The follower responds, "I will, but first let me go and bury my father," wanting to determine for himself what gets priority in his life. We see a side of Jesus we haven't seen before as he replies, "Let the dead bury the dead." The third jumps in, "I will follow you, just let me say farewell to my friends first,"

clarifying that his willingness to follow comes with strings attached. And Jesus retorts, “no one who puts hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven.”

At this point, we begin to understand that while all that ink has been spilt on being the best leader, being a faithful follower might be harder than originally assumed. Discipleship, *followership*, it appears, requires as much intention and focus as leadership. At first glance, we want to be like the first follower—to willingly follow wherever Jesus leads. But blind following doesn’t embody the fullness of God’s call or engage a full understanding of the cost. The second two seem to understand there is a cost and are looking for a middle road, a way to keep one foot in the familiar and comfortable and the other in lock step with Jesus. Sure, they seem to say, following requires sacrifice, but what of honoring your father and mother, especially at the time of their death? What about honoring the relationships of those we hold dear? There is even precedent for these questions in scripture from Joseph and Pharoah to Elijah and Elisha.⁵ At first glance, Jesus appears mean and dismissive—not the qualities of a leader that make the Forbes Top 10 list for leadership. But having set his face toward Jerusalem, having such a clear understanding of his call to follow his Father, even to the point of death, perhaps Jesus is not commenting out of dismissive anger but instead trying to communicate the depth to which following requires your full self *and* offers life and grace that is worth the sacrifices required.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer joined the Confessing Church movement in Germany, he heard Christ’s call on his own life to follow. Bonhoeffer set his face toward Jerusalem when he responded to that call, understanding that to follow Jesus meant actively resisting Hitler and his leadership in Nazi Germany, ultimately costing him his life. Deeply aware of the cost, much of Bonhoeffer’s preaching and writing focused on this tension in today’s text: wanting to respond to Christ’s call to experience grace upon grace offered freely by God *and yet* acknowledging that doing so with the kind of focus Jesus calls us to in this text comes at a deep cost.

In his text, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer wrestles with the level of sacrifice required to follow Jesus. Bonhoeffer argues that discipleship, this bold act of following Jesus, comes not from our own self-determined act to follow, like the first disciple declares, but from God’s call to us to participate in a full life with Christ. When Jesus says to the second, “Follow me,” Jesus’ call to follow and the grace that he offers is so irresistible, so good, nothing can stand in its way—not even the death of a loved one. The life ahead and this call of discipleship have a cost—leaving behind some things—but doing so isn’t punishment when the new life being offered and the grace before us is so irresistibly good. And yet, and yet, as the third follower learns, a disciple willing to follow but concurrently setting his own terms lacks the obedience and single-mindedness that Jesus demonstrates when he puts his face toward Jerusalem. Bonhoeffer’s dance places us in the tension of today’s text: only by following do we encounter new life in Christ, but new life in Christ requires some cost.⁶

Bonhoeffer best puts it this way:

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor. Luke 9:51-62-Exegetical Commentary. *Feasting on the Gospels*, Luke Vol 1.

⁶ ref. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship* pp 60-61.

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate...Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again...Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.⁷

Jesus' call in today's text is to a life of discipleship. Followership rather than leadership is what leads us to the fullness of life promised by God. Discipleship costs us because it requires our dedication and obedience to God. But discipleship offers us an experience of grace that places us within God's loving story. It's not flashy. It doesn't come with a title to put on a resume. It doesn't guarantee fame or power or a boost to the ego. But it does provide a way to shape our lives with open hearts and open hands and an open mind for where Jesus is calling us follow.

When Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem and showed us what it truly looked like to follow God, he did so knowing that the road for him would include his dying and his rising. Three times in Luke's Gospel, he foreshadows what is to come. Jesus knew as well that this act of following God's call kept him in perfect union with the Father during his life on earth and would place him in perfect union with God when he ascended to heaven. To show his disciples how to follow prepared us not only to follow him to Jerusalem but to follow him even when he has ascended and is no longer with us in the flesh. Jesus' perfect modeling of discipleship enables us still to follow today.

It is no mistake that the followers in today's story are not named. One of the characteristics of being a disciple in this story is that your own identity is not as important as your act of following Jesus. The follower's names never got written down in history, as a leaders might have been, but without the followers daring to believe that Jesus was who he said he was, without their willingness to participate in the obedience required to follow, we wouldn't be here singing praises to our living God today.

This past week, your pastor has been at the Montreat Music and Worship conference. The one whom you typically call pastor and leader has spent the week being a participant and a follower. Whether attending workshops or singing in the choir, he has joined his voice in liturgy and song as a faithful disciple of Jesus. Instead of leading worship with his name in the bulletin, he has gathered with hundreds of others in the pews to follow Christ together and give glory to God. So it is perhaps appropriate that we end with a musical story.

Since 1847, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, the 360-voice choir that is arguably one of the most famous in America today, has been uniting the world in song. As Ben probably learned this week, to make great choral music together requires every vocalist to be a follower, not trying to outshine their neighbor, but blending together in perfect harmony. The success of a choir of that size is unrelenting focus in following the conductor's lead, trusting that his downbeat will connect all of them in song. For decades, the choir has closed every performance with Mack Wilburg's arrangement of *God Be With You 'til We*

⁷ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. (New York: Touchstone, 1959). 45.

Meet Again. Watching closely, they follow their trusted conductor to close each performance with these words of promise:

God be with you til we meet again;
By his counsels guide, uphold you;
With his sheep securely fold you.
God be with you til we meet again.

But in 1974, when Richard Condie, the choir's 11th conductor, was set to retire, he devised a plan to avoid all the sad goodbyes. As they prepared to sing their beloved closing song, Condie gave the downbeat, put down his baton, and walked to the side.⁸ And in that moment, this choir that had trusted and followed their conductor so faithfully for so many years sang on. Those who were well practiced in following knew in that moment how to follow one another so that the good news of which they sang drifted up to the heavens still. May we dare to follow Christ so boldly that we too join in heaven's song. Amen.

⁸ <https://www.mormontabernaclechoir.org/articles/former-choir-conductor-walked-out-of-tabernacle.html>