

+ Mark 1:40-45 + Know How to Follow the Leader + 6th Sunday after the Epiphany + 15 February 2009 +

“Follow the Leader” is a simple game with simple rules. Most, if not all, of us have played it at some time. Someone is designated the leader and everyone else follows. I’ve used the illustration here before to describe our following of Jesus Christ, but this morning, we aren’t focusing on the fact that we actually follow Jesus through faith in him or on why we follow him, but how we are to follow Jesus. So again we go back to the children’s game, “Follow the Leader”. How do you play it? Wherever the leader goes, you go. Whatever the leader does, you do. It’s not always the easiest, especially if the leader does actions or goes places you don’t expect, but it’s most fun when that leader knows where he’s going and what he’s doing.

It’s a simple children’s game, but also a picture of how we are to follow our heavenly Leader. As believers in Christ, we are not leaders, but followers. Christ alone is our leader through faith in him, so how do we follow? Do we always trust that he knows where he’s going with our lives? Do we always obey his will? We’d have to confess we haven’t, but this morning as we consider the account of Jesus healing a leper, we’ll come to better understand and **KNOW HOW TO FOLLOW THE LEADER.**

The man with leprosy had nothing. He had somehow contracted a skin disease that was contagious, hideous, painful and probably incurable. According to the Law of Moses, leprosy made him a social outcast forced to declare, “Unclean! Unclean!”, whenever he came near people. He was forced to live away from populated areas in the wilderness. If he actually was cured, the Law commanded that he have the priests at the temple verify his healing. He was alone, and everywhere he went, people ran away from him in disgust and fear. He had nothing to bring him pity or mercy or favor, but instead was wasting away at the bottom of society’s barrel.

Still the leper knew he could find help. We’re told that sometime during the busiest year of Jesus’ ministry, this man with leprosy **“came to him and begged him on his knees, ‘If you are willing, you can make me clean.’”** The leper had heard about Jesus and his amazing miracles, but along the way he also had come to know that Jesus was more than a miracle-maker. He was the Son of God. Who else could heal so miraculously? Jesus was the only way he could be healed. So the leper came to Jesus fully trusting in his mercy, but willing to accept Jesus’ will as best, as we can see from his request, **“If you are willing...”** If Jesus were to not heal him, the man was also willing to accept that as the will of the Almighty God.

Such a trust in Christ’s will is remarkable on the one hand, but understandable on the other because this man realized he had nothing to offer the Almighty God. He had no favor, no merit, no anything to offer in exchange for his healing, but he knew he could cling to the mercy of Christ. He could find help in whatever way was fitting to the Son of God. Mark tells us, **“Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.”** The English language doesn’t do justice to Jesus’ compassionate love and mercy. Literally, Jesus’ insides “turned over” because he was so filled with concern for the man. It made Jesus feel sick to not heal the man. In that healing, however, we not only see Christ’s compassionate mercy, but also his glorious grace. Jesus did what no one else was willing to do. He reached out and touched the man. He didn’t simply say, “Be healed!” He didn’t shout it from a safe distance, but in undeserved love, Jesus reached out and healed the man.

To truly follow Christ our leader, we need to follow with a faith that trusts his holy will too, but before we do that, we also need to realize we have nothing before God. Isaiah once wrote, **“All our righteous acts are like filthy rags...”** and Paul later wrote, **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”** By nature, we can’t go before the holy God and expect his help and favor. To do so would be foolish because we have nothing to offer, but disobedience, hostility and ignorance. By nature, we come before the holy God in spiritual rags covered with the scourge of sin and deserving nothing, but punishment. As good as we might seem to ourselves and to the people we know, we have to realize that before the holy God we have nothing.

...But remember how the leper followed Jesus! When he realized he had nothing, he went to the One who had everything, the One who alone could help him. Our help can only be found in Christ too! You might recall these familiar words, **“In Christ alone my hope is found, he is my light, my strength, my song; This cornerstone, this solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm. What heights of love, what depths of peace, when fears are stilled, when strivings cease! My Comforter, my all in all, here in the love of Christ I stand.”** Jesus is the only Source of help when we’re faced with the scourge of sin’s guilt or the slavery of Satan or the specter of sin’s wage of death. Jesus is the only solid ground when all the earth seems to give way and life seems like a billowing sea. Jesus is the one Voice worth following, the one Leader who alone leads the way to life, the only Help and Healer for the sin-ridden soul. We can be sure of that, because Jesus is the only One, who **“was pierced for our transgressions ...crushed for our iniquities ...and by his wounds we are healed.”**

By doing so, Jesus answered our greatest need not with a divine “No”, but with an **“It is finished”** that loudly and clearly cuts through all the gloom of this life to reach us here, to make us his own, and to forgive our sins. By faith,

then, we have good reason to trust Christ's will and his answers to the problems of our lives. Sometimes those answers won't be a resounding "Yes" as we hope, but instead a "Later" or even a "No." That's the reality of following Christ, but like that leper we realize that whatever Christ's will is for our lives, his answer is always best. Paul once explained it, "...**We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him...**"

Trusting Christ's will means clinging to his mercy, clinging to his promises fulfilled and still being fulfilled. Following the Leader of leaders means trusting that Christ does know where he's taking us and that wherever we go, his will is always best. By faith, the leper knew that and so do we, but following the leader also means following with a faith that obeys Christ's will.

You see, Jesus gives a rather strange (at least to our ears!) command. Mark tells us, "**Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: 'See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.'**" Now it seems strange that Jesus would actually command a healed believer to not tell anyone the good news about the miracle he had just performed, but Jesus had some good reasons. He wasn't using reverse psychology to get the man to share the news. The ex-leper would've done it anyway. He wanted the man to properly obey the Law of Moses, which was still in place, and be reviewed by the priest at the temple. This would then release the good news properly to the world. Jesus was also near the height of his popularity. If the man disobeyed, Jesus' ministry of sharing the good news of sins forgiven would've been hindered by endless demands for healing miracles and an even greater popularity crush.

Such a seemingly strange and hard command for the healed man reminds us that not everything Jesus commands us to do is easy, fun or makes perfect sense to our limited, sinful human minds. Christ, however, has good reason for making such commands. For example, he commands us to stand up for the truth of God's Word and proclaim it in all its clarity even if doing so hurts our relationship with friends or family or even fellow members. He commands us to admonish a fellow believer when they sin and to help them recognize their sin, even when they won't listen. He commands us to disagree with sinful lifestyles that have become acceptable, if not the norm.

Jesus has good reason for such commands. If the teaching of his Word is tainted in even the slightest way, it can completely ruin eternity for souls like yours and mine. If sin is not called sin and the sinner is not called to turn from that sin, Christ's work of saving sinners becomes meaningless. Jesus doesn't want us to go to hell, so he has good reason for his commands.

...Yet obeying Christ's will also means recognizing that we'll need his forgiveness, especially if we let our good intentions take priority over his will. The last verse of our text tells us that the healed man "**went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places.**" If we were in the former leper's sandals, we probably would've done the same thing. The man was healed and he wanted to share the good news, but his good intentions actually hindered Jesus, who now had to stay outside of town.

In the same way, we need to realize there will be times when we will, in spite of our best intentions, disobey Christ's will, give him or his Church a bad name, or even hinder the work of his good news going out to the world. We don't condone that, but we need to recognize that that will happen as long as we are sinful people living in a sinful world. At times like that, when you disobey Christ's will, know, though, that you can go back to his mercy and grace. It's a not a license to sin freely, not a "Get Out of Jail Free" pass, but the assurance of knowing that even though you and I sin daily, we still have forgiveness in Christ. We daily need to go back and realize, "**Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling.**"

Forgiveness, even for those times when our best intentions take priority over Christ's holy will, is found in Christ alone, who comes to us through his saving Gospel message and through his body and blood given with bread and wine in his Holy Supper. That forgiveness comes to us through the daily remembrance of Holy Baptism, through which our sinful nature is drowned and a new person arises anew eager to follow Christ our Leader with a faith trusting and obeying his will. Forgiven in Christ, we then follow.

As a kid, following the leader wasn't always easy, but eventually it always brought us home. The same holds true for believers in Christ. Following Christ isn't always easy and it won't always be easy, but it will always bring us home. One day Christ our Leader will definitely bring us home to be with him in heaven someday. God grant that for Jesus' sake! Amen.