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“Faith That Works 3: Jesus’ Followers”  
Proverbs 1:20-33 Mark 8:27-38 James 3:1-12

INTRODUCTION TO PROVERBS 1:20-33

Solomon has been given wisdom. He has built the Temple. In this morning’s passage he personifies wisdom as a woman who laments that her advice has been ignored and predicts the consequences. Hear the word of the Lord from Proverbs 1:20-33.

INTRODUCTION TO MARK 8:27-38

In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus and his disciples were on a Mission Trip. Like we heard last week they had gone across the border into Gentile territory and Jesus had an encounter with a woman who had a daughter who needed healing. This morning they are making their way back home traveling through a Gentile suburb called Caesarea Philippi. Jesus paused to give his disciples what today we might call a reality check. Hear the word of the Lord from the gospel of Mark 8:27-38

Let’s pray. Dear Lord, Thank you for this, your word. Open our eyes to see, our minds to understand, our hearts to receive your word. Open my lips to share what you have given to me and prepare us all to be changed so that we may respond to your word through the power of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

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How many of you ever played the game Follow the Leader? It’s a game where those who play try to see if they could mimic the actions, words, walks of the person who was the leader for the moment. In this morning’s lessons we are challenged to become those who follow the leader: Jesus.

In what we have come to call Jesus’ Great Commission he charged his disciples to go into all the world to MAKE disciples. He didn’t say, go and HAVE disciples. Jesus didn’t assume that having children automatically resulted in them becoming disciples. Children are born, but disciples are made ... by being born again.

To be sure there is an instantaneous BEGINNING when a person begins following Jesus. The Holy Spirit brings about that new birth and with it come spiritual gifts and spiritual fruit. But it is just that, a beginning.

In the same way that physical birth is just the beginning, so it is with a spiritual birth. A brand-new baby must learn to walk and talk. A brand-new Christian can begin to witness to the initial changes that have taken place, but they are in no shape to teach Greek and Hebrew after 3 weeks!

Disciples are made through following. They are made through trials, temptations, and suffering. Jesus knew that and that is why he challenged Peter and why he challenged his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him.

When it comes to the word “disciples” some have a tendency to think of them as the original 12 guys who wore sandals. That’s why for this morning’s meditation I’d like to use the word “follower.” I like to think of Jesus commanding his followers to go and make more followers. For me, the word “Follower” implies someone on a journey who is actively moving, following someone who is leading. It also means that if we sit down we cease to follow. If we go the opposite way of the one we are supposed to follow, we cease to follow. If we take a detour to follow the “rabbit-trail of the day” we cease to follow. If we only gather to remember when we were following we cease to follow.

I grew up hearing about Jesus and learning stories about him in Sunday school, but I didn’t start “following” him until I was 20. Some may start earlier but get sidetracked or start following someone or something else. Some may sit down for 10 or 15 years... and when they do they are not FOLLOWING!

When Jesus asked his followers, “Who do people say that I am? They responded with what the polls said—they said, “Some say Elijah, others say John the Baptist or some prophet. But Peter had the right answer. He said, “You are the Messiah!”

It was only AFTER Peter said that Jesus was the Messiah that Jesus revealed his plan for the rest of his ministry on Earth. He spoke very plainly, and very clearly: “It is going to be the worst week of your life.

Imagine what we would feel like if our country was invaded by and was being ruled by what we considered to be a godless army. (or an army that seems to serve a different god or different gods). Imagine that the tension is mounting, and you are thinking you are about to attempt a coup. The odds are stacked against you, but you have a very strong belief that God is on your side despite the overwhelming odds. That’s how Peter was thinking.

Peter, the man who had just recognized Jesus as the Messiah, was shocked by Jesus’ predictions of his death, so Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Jesus. He says, “Lord, this is not a very good military strategy. You are not going to die, don’t say that. It’s not good for morale. We are going to be there with you and we will fight to the end and we will throw these Romans out of Israel, you will ascend to the throne in place of Herod, and we will be at your right and left hand.”

Peter believed that the kingdom of God could be obtained instantly by force. Remember he is the only disciple that drew a sword and swung it when they came to arrest Jesus. And all he accomplished was moving Jesus to put the

guard's ear back on. Peter had a worldly view of the Kingdom and Jesus is speaking about a heavenly kingdom.

So, Jesus rebukes Peter back! He calls him a tool of Satan and says, "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Peter, you are out of line. Get behind me Peter .... and the rest of you get behind him and take up YOUR cross and follow ME.

To address the confusion, Jesus then pulls his closest followers together and brings them before a larger crowd of folks. In front of the crowd he corrects Peter's aspirations for privilege, rank, and power and he gives them this simple little directive: You must take up your cross and follow me. You must become FOLLOWERS.

Jill Duffield writes, "Peter wants better for Jesus and Peter, like us, wants better for himself too. We want Jesus to be anything other than the servant Lord and the crucified Savior. We want him to be the wish-granting hero of the prosperity gospel. We want him to be the confidant cozied up to those in power. We want him to be a good example to emulate and evoke at our convenience, or maybe the nice, gentle shepherd who loves us just the way we are, no matter how we are or what we do. We don't want a mocked, rejected, suffering Messiah who tells us to take up our cross and follow, but Jesus tells us quite openly: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

But what does that mean? Even if we want to deny ourselves, and take up our crosses and follow, what does that look like? If we say Jesus is the Messiah, more than a prophet and John the Baptist, not merely a moral teacher or a nice person or a granter of our greatest desires, but the One who was rejected, suffered, died and was raised on the third day, what does that matter for our daily living? For our church? For our world?" 1

I'm reminded of the story of a young girl who went to a James Avery store. She told the clerk, "I'd like to buy a cross." The clerk took her to the display and she looked over it for a while but didn't see one she wanted. She asked the clerk, "Don't you have any with the little man on it?"

Crosses are more than something to wear around our neck. We are called to do more than wear a cross; we are to bear a cross. We all have crosses to carry. We all have struggles and obstacles and challenges.

Jesus does not simply want us to remember his cross as something he himself suffered on our behalf. If he did he would have simply said take up MY cross and follow me. Instead he said, "Take "your" cross and follow me

This is a difficult thing for us to do. It is difficult because it goes against everything that our culture tells us is important. From the time we were toddlers

we have heard, "be your own person," "strive to be number one," "you deserve the best." And this has led us into all sorts of problems with people taking unfair advantage of others for their own personal gain. We need to allow the words of Jesus to challenge us. "What will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your soul?" Jesus calls us to a decision: Will we live for ourselves, or will we live for ... ever?

This week's passage from Jesus' brother James warns us about the dangers of what we say. He reminds us that animals can be tamed, but the tongue not so much. From the same mouth can come blessings as well as curses. Who we say Jesus is has an eternal effect on our destinies.

Part of having a Faith That Works involves not only doing the right thing, but saying the right thing at the right time. It involves speaking up in the face of injustice, advocating for those in need, sharing wisdom like the writer of Proverbs shared and warning of the consequences of ignoring God's wisdom. That's an integral part of having a Faith that Works.

It reminds me of those who gathered at the Goose Creek Consolidated Independent School District meetings to speak up for Superintendent Randy O'Brien. It was not enough to have Faith in Mr. O'Brien and his ability to do the job he was hired to do. Those who have faith in him needed to do the work of showing up and speaking up on his behalf.

It reminds me of the ministry of C.A.S.A. Court Appointed Special Advocates where people like Debbye Waller undergo training so that they can have a Faith that Works as they support children when they have to go to court.

It reminds me of what I saw the other night on a report of Firefighters working to free a man from his home when a tree fell on his house as a result of hurricane Florence. They were successful in freeing the man, but his wife and infant child were killed by the felled tree. The circle of firefighters fell to their knees in prayer and exhaustion and sorrow.

Fill in the blank. There are as many ways to have Faith that Works as there are followers. James says that Faith without Works is dead. I think the reverse is also true. Works without Faith is deadly.

I want to quote Jill Duffield again. She writes, "If we acted with just a fraction of that abandon and confidence, our lives and the world would be radically different. People would be more important than property values. Love would triumph over fear. Mercy, not retribution, would be our default mode. Humility would replace hubris. Generosity would smother greed with its goodness. Wisdom's cries would be accompanied by choruses of praise. Even the rocks would shout out in joy. Demoniacs would no longer be relegated to graveyards. Prodigal parties would

rage on every single night and no one would be left injured by the side of the road.”

Who signs up to hear the news that we no longer live to ourselves, that even before a word is on our lips God knows it and expects it to reflect our love and loyalty to the Lord, that our ways are not God’s ways and therefore we need to check our instincts and see if they square with wisdom’s call? All of this sounds as if we are called to deny ourselves. Really. Deny ourselves. Put the brakes on our tongues and thumbs, our speech and tweets. Question our justifications about our status, wealth and power. Consider who we say that Jesus is and start examining if our lives reflect that confession of faith. Take up OUR cross and follow. 2

What is the Faith that drives your works? Who is Jesus to you? Is he just another prophet like Elijah or John the Baptist? Is he just someone to hear about on the weekend? Is he the Messiah, and the Son of God? Jesus is waiting for us to accept him on his terms, and to join him in his forever game of Follow the Leader.

Each of us has a choice. We can lay down the cross we have been given to bear and passively live our lives trying to avoid challenges or we can take it up and be transformed, *living for Jesus a life that is true*; and have Faith That Works because we are Jesus’ ... followers. “

Let’s Pray. Merciful God, in Jesus you call us to the new and living way of the gospel; we give thanks that we can be numbered among those so chosen. We are thankful for Peter, who testified boldly that Jesus was the Christ, even though he was confused about what that meant. From him we learn how we too need to make our confession, although we may not be clear about what you intend us to do.

As we had people pray for us as we recovered from Hurricane Harvey a year ago, so now we pray for those recovering from Hurricane Florence. Be with them Lord and help us to know how we can put our Faith to work in supporting them in their time of need. Hear us as we now lift to you by name those people and those concerns on our hearts this morning.

We give thanks for Jesus. Help us to feel his comforting, sustaining and strengthening Spirit surrounding us, giving us assurance that we are not alone. Help us hear anew the testimony of those who have gone before us, that you do not forsake those who put their trust in you. Turn our heads from gazing on what has been the security of the past and help us accept the vision and promise of your glorious reign. Give us courage to take those leaps of faith which will transport us from the known to the unknown, from idolatry to obedience, from selfishness to service. Give us the grace to hear the call to take up our cross and become his ... followers.

- 1 Jill Duffield Looking into the Lectionary 9-16-18
- 2 Jill Duffield Looking into the Lectionary 9-16-18

