

ORDINARY SUNDAY XXIV “B”
SEPTEMBER 15/16, 2018

Being a follower is not something we encourage in America. No college commencement speaker has ever congratulated the graduates on becoming “followers of tomorrow.” Nobody frames their resume to highlight where they have exercised “followership.”

But there is one place where becoming a “follower” is encouraged. Twitter. Twitter is all about following. You connect with other people by choosing to “follow” them, in the language it uses. If you’re following someone, you receive everything they say through Twitter. Choosing to follow requires some real thought. Is this person interesting or funny or insightful or are they just going to tell you what breakfast cereal they had this morning? Whose thoughts and activities do you really want to keep up with?

If there had been Twitter in the first century, Jesus probably would have been pretty popular. Lots of people wanted to follow him to see what he was doing and hear what he had to say. By the time today’s Gospel scene unfolds, Jesus has made quite a name for himself. He’s been barnstorming the countryside on a streak of healings and exorcisms and other miracles; he’s been saying lots of things and the crowds follow everything he says and does. And he even has a closer group of followers, the disciples.

Today’s Gospel reveals, these closest “followers” of Jesus are not doing too well in their following. They’ve been following him all over; they’ve seen everything he’s done and heard everything he’s said, but they can’t seem to master the message. Jesus wants to know how much of all this they’ve been getting so far. “Who do you say that I am?” After several multiple choice responses something clicks with Peter, and he actually comes up with the right answer. “You are the Messiah,” he simply states.

But you can have the correct answer and still not understand anything about the subject. Just a few verses after he gives Jesus the correct answer, Peter is pulling Jesus aside to tell him he has the wrong one. A military general messiah; a charismatic political messiah; an evangelical religious messiah; someone who will inspire the populace to follow start a revolution

and overthrow Roman rule and/or a corrupt Temple hierarchy—okay, but all this stuff about a Messiah who suffers, is rejected, and ultimately killed; what kind of messiah is that? Who wants to sign on as a follower for that?

Jesus in no uncertain terms spells out for Peter, the disciples and us what choosing to be a “Follower” of his means. Following Jesus requires more than clicking a button and keeping up with him, knowing what he says and does. It means going where he goes and doing what he does the way he does it. **It means taking up the cross.** No idle language here. For Jesus’ original hearers the cross was the ultimate form of state-sponsored capital punishment for speaking or acting in a way that was non-conforming to the customs and laws of the Roman Empire. Outside every major city was a scaffold on which hung the bodies (sometimes for days before they died) of those who dared to “make waves” for all to see who chose to follow someone or something other than the prevailing Roman culture and law.

Today the cross has either become a piece of custom jewelry or “bearing my cross” is used to frame a particular irritation with another person or situation. Suffering on the cross was not imposed on Jesus; he took it up himself willingly, intentionally to redeem all of us. For Jesus, and all those who choose to be his followers, the cross is all about the freely willed choice to relinquish my EGO. To take up our cross and follow Jesus means we follow him in refusing to think only about ourselves, to speak up for and suffer for the redemption of others even if it risks us losing our lives or our popularity.

Here we meet Jesus’ call to the corporal (bodily) and spiritual works of mercy. Feeding and advocating for the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, for just and compassionate treatment and laws for the immigrant and refugee, for those denied access to health care, the unborn, the elderly, for the elimination of the death penalty and advocating for programs that provide the opportunity for rehabilitation and restorative justice both for the criminal and the victims of crime. This is what James in our second reading spells out in when he speaks about faith in following of Jesus demonstrated through works and works underlying faith is all about.

Jesus invites us to “Follow me.” Like Twitter the choice is ours.