

PROPER NINETEEN, PENTECOST 17, SEPTEMBER 15, 2024

Social media is a fact of life today with many different platforms from Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, X, Snapchat, Youtube and many more. Celebrities, influencers, even politicians determine their success by how many followers they have. Influencers are a new phenomenon as they plug various products and services that companies pay them to hawk and it is a lucrative business for both. In fact there are different levels of influencers depending on how many followers they have.

It all begs the question why do we follow certain people? What are we getting from them? Is the message or product they are expounding enticing. Is it enhancing our lives?

Is it pure entertainment? Why do some people hang on to every word they say? Why do some people's lives center around these people?

Perhaps the question that also needs to be asked is are they fans or followers? There is a big difference. A fan is an ardent admirer or enthusiast. A follower is an adherent or devotee of a particular person, cause, or activity.

This can create a problem because sometimes being a follower of a person or an idea can lead to tribalism. A tribal leader calls the shots and after a while, your immersion in tribal loyalty makes the activities of another tribe not just alien but close to incomprehensible."

George Orwell once suggested that a function of tribalism is that, "There is no crime, absolutely none, that cannot be condoned when 'our' side commits it." This is a belief that anything done by me – by us – must be okay, and whatever is done by you – by them – must be wrong. What tribalism creates, obviously, is an "us against them" mentality. Us against Them. Them against Us.

So, now, what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? We know from scripture that Jesus tells us that lots of people wanted to follow him to see what he was doing and hear what he had to say. By the time this story in today's gospel happens, Jesus had made quite a name for himself. He'd been barnstorming the countryside on a streak of healings and exorcisms and other miracles; he'd been saying a lot of things that were sometimes funny, sometimes provocative, and often insightful, and the crowds followed everything he said and did. And, of course, he had a closer group of followers, the disciples.

Now in today's Gospel Jesus wanted to know from his inner circle why people and even them were following him. "Who do you say that I am?" he asked. And, somehow, something clicked for Peter, and he actually came up with the right answer. "You are the Messiah," he said simply, and he passed the test.

But you can have the right answer and still not understand anything about it. Just a few verses after he gave Jesus the correct answer, Jesus tells them the Messiah must suffer and die. Well, that about just did Peter in and he began to rebuke Jesus for saying all this stuff about the Messiah having to suffer and be rejected and killed. "What kind of Messiah is that?" Peter demanded. Peter in effect is saying to Jesus: "Listen; nothing succeeds like success. As the Messiah, you have to be a figure of power and accomplishment; you have to build yourself up, not run yourself down! How can you possibly be a successful Messiah and attract lots of followers if you say such things about yourself?"

Peter's expectations of Jesus is that he will become a glorious and successful leader who'll restore the Kingdom of David and return the Jewish people to their rightful place at the forefront of the community of nations. When Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, he is revealing, not any true insight into Jesus' identity, but his own concept of Jesus and the Messiah based on the expectations of popular culture. For Peter, "success" is a matter of measuring the number of followers and amount of power Jesus has; these are the criteria for success which have more to do with the demands of popular culture than they do with the living out of faith.

But Jesus cut him off. And then he called the crowd and the disciples around them, and he gave them all the answer to the question of what kind of Messiah he really would be, what kind of Messiah they were following: "If any want to become my followers," he said, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, will save it."

We also have to ask ourselves the same question about what we think Jesus as the Messiah means for us? Do we have our own agenda when it comes to what Messiah-ship means? An agenda shaped around our own comfort? Our own lifestyle? Our own priorities and preferences?

Do we prefer a Messiah who aligns more easily with our social setting, our political views, our cultural expectations, our spiritual goals? Is the Jesus we follow a Jesus who dislikes the same people we dislike? Values the same comforts we value? Cherishes the same life goals we cherish?

It's not enough to recite the creeds, the traditions, the theologies, the abstractions. Most Christians say them in worship as something-you-do, and leave it at that. It's not sufficient to rely solely on those responses. Following Jesus requires a lot more than clicking a button and keeping up with him, knowing what he says and does and then picking and choosing what we like. Jesus asks us, his followers, to put aside other people's interpretations. At some point, our faith must become personal. Intimate. Invested. Who do *you* say that I am he asks each and everyone of us.

Who is Jesus for you and what does his teachings mean to you personally and not just the ones that align with your ideals? What is he asking when he tells us to take up his cross. It means actually going where he goes and doing what he does the way that he does it, which is crucial. To take up our cross and follow Jesus means we follow him in refusing to think only about ourselves and do everything to reject the us vs them mentality. Instead Jesus invites us into a us and them mentality which leads us to communicate and cooperate, to respect and recognize mutual needs.

Taking up the cross is actually about responding with love and not hate. It's about standing up for the marginalized. It's about being vulnerable, taking risks, and responding with generosity and grace to the abundant Kingdom into which God invites us. It's about extolling hope instead of fear. We also have to ask ourselves if the people whose ideals we follow extoll Jesus' teachings or do they invest in fear, division and negativity?

Bottom line, who we think Jesus is will determine how far we'll go in following him and how large or tiny a cross we'll bear in his name. Taking up his cross is defining ourselves outside of political parties, national identity, economic status, family of origin, even religion. It is about defining ourselves, our priorities, and our beliefs to be more in

line with those of Jesus which is loving our neighbor, our enemy, God, and even ourselves. It's about making space and a place for another that recognizes her or his life is as important and sacred as ours. It means re-examining our beliefs and attitudes about who we are, who another is, and who God is. Being a follower of Jesus is not easy. It's hard work and it is more than being a fan. So which are you? A fan or a follower? Amen.