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When you join a social media platform you are usually given the choice to follow someone. Instagram, twitter, snapchat, Facebook, tiktok all allow you to follow someone else's posts. People determine their popularity by how many followers they have. Well, believe it or not someone decided when Twitter first made its debut about 15 years ago, to start a twitter feed for Jesus. Seriously, there is one for Jesus, whose twitter account is @jesus and it says he's a carpenter, healer and God. If you follow Jesus on Twitter you will get updates which are sometimes funny, sometimes provocative, and often insightful. When you think about it, it's not all that different from the Jesus we encounter in Scripture. But how many people really want to follow the real Jesus in their lives.

Now we know from scripture we're told that lots of people wanted to follow Jesus 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 – I guess we could call them the original social media followers. And, of course, he had a closer group of followers, the disciples.

So, in today's Gospel Jesus wanted to know what people, who were following him, were saying about him. And after their answers, Jesus wanted to know who the disciples thought he was. "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. Peter was feeling pretty proud of himself until he heard Jesus start talking about suffering. That's when Peter pulled Jesus aside to yell at him. 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 declared Jesus to be the Messiah, he is revealing, not any true insight into Jesus' identity, but his own concept of Jesus 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."

Following Jesus requires a lot more than clicking a button and keeping up with him, knowing what he says and does. So, I'm left wondering what kind of Messiah do I want. I know the "right" answers to Jesus's question about his identity. The Son of God. The Savior. The Redeemer. The Christ. But do I have my own agenda when it comes to what Messiah-ship means? Is my agenda shaped around my own comfort? My own lifestyle? My own priorities and preferences? Do I look away in embarrassment when God challenges that agenda?

What about you? Would you prefer a Messiah who aligns more easily with your social settings, your political norms, your cultural expectations, your spiritual goals? Is the Jesus you follow a Jesus who dislikes the same people you dislike? Values the same comforts you value? Cherishes the same life goals you cherish? Or is he the Jesus who once made Peter flinch in shame? The Jesus of humility and surrender? Self-denial and sacrifice? Death and resurrection?

Who we think Jesus is will determine how far we'll go in following him. It determines how large or tiny a cross we'll bear in his name. Or how fearlessly we'll profess him to a world that needs the love and healing he offers. How humbly we'll repent of the church's failures, and begin again to be Christ's hands and feet to those in need. It's about how boldly we'll dedicate ourselves to sharing the paradoxical gospel of the cross, the grave, and the empty tomb.

To really follow Jesus means actually going where he goes and doing what he does the way that he does it, which is crucial given the phrase "take up your cross" and what that really means. To take up our cross and follow Jesus means we follow him in refusing to think only about ourselves. Sometimes that might mean losing one's life but for most of us taking up the cross is actually about generosity; it is actually about responding with love. It's about being vulnerable, taking risks, and responding with generosity and grace to the abundant Kingdom into which God invites us.

"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." In other words, following Jesus is for losers; the question is what we are willing to lose.

I have heard that at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, when Christians were literally suffering and dying for justice there, Archbishop Desmond Tutu used to gather his staff around him in the mornings for prayer. And often as he was closing, he would ask, "If being Christian became a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict us?" I think he was asking that question to keep himself and his staff focused on who and whose they were, rather than just what they were doing. They were not simply leaders, leading an important social struggle for dignity and freedom; they were followers, following Jesus Christ in insisting that God's reconciling love transcends anything that tries to resist it, which apartheid challenged. Without being followers, being leaders was not enough; people had to be able to see and hear them following Christ in their lives and ministry for that leadership to really make sense in the first place.

Maybe we need to have a Center for Christian Followership. As much as the church needs leadership development that's not going to count for much if we're not developing our followership. But the truth is, every church should be a center for Christian followership, a place where we help each other become losers, losers of anything that

keeps us from following the real Jesus not the one we created to make ourselves be a feel good Christian. To follow the real Jesus we need to lose our fears, anxieties, our pasts, our status, our prejudices, hatred, our need to be in control of our lives and the lives of others, our faith, anything that keeps us from losing ourselves in the abundance of the grace that we receive, the love that we are to share and the ministry that we are to fulfill.

As it turns out, we have a lot to lose to become a true follower of Jesus. But it's never too late to follow the real Jesus. Amen.