

“Follow the Leader”
Psalm 25:4-10; Romans 1:1-7;
John 10:1-5

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I was thinking about how we make decisions and how there are various phases in our lives where we make those decisions. Now that it's fall, we're making all kinds of plans for the fall. I had a daughter who got married last month, and I was thinking about the changes in her life. She's making new choices. From early in our lives to late in our lives, we have decisions to make, paths to follow. Perhaps it wouldn't be a big deal at all if we could just take any path and think that it would be the right path. I don't know about you, but it hasn't always worked out that way in my life. There have been times that I have realized that I have taken paths that haven't been so good, and I wish I had never gone down that path. I would really appreciate being able to figure that out before I get on the path rather than later.

One thing I realized is that sometimes it's helpful to have a guide. This summer when we were traveling around, Helen met a woman at Iona who happened to be from Dublin. She invited us to contact her when we came to Dublin, and we did. She showed us around and it was wonderful to have a guide. So I have to remember that when I have a decision to make, when I have a path to follow, perhaps I don't have to make the decision all by myself. I can find a guide.

I don't have to let all the stuff that's happened in my past get in the way. The Psalmist is asking, “Lord, forget the transgressions of my youth. Help me find the right path.” Remember what the Psalmist says about being able to find the way. The Psalmist says that those who come humbly, God will show. It's useful to have a guide, but sometimes we have to remember to ask for that guidance. Have some humility and recognize that God is willing to guide, and all that has gone before doesn't have to get in the way.

The other thing I was thinking about is that as we look for guidance, one of the places we look is to other people who have found their way. We visited a number of different communities and each community was founded by someone or by a small group of folks. So when we went to Taizé, Brother Roger was the one who founded it and described a simple way, and encouraged that worship that not only is punctuating the day, but is expected to go with you. Or L'Abri: Francis Schaffer founded it and it takes on a flavor of his way of understanding and approaching God, really a much more rational and thoughtful way. So we have founders. We have people who help us see different ways.

Even being part of the Presbyterian Church, if we think back in the trajectory of theological thought, we have some founders in our past. John Calvin and John Knox were people who helped the reformed tradition in its pathway, and we can look back to them and learn from them. However, I think that sometimes we have to be a little bit careful of how much we pay attention to just the founders.

Have you ever played the game called Telephone? One person starts by whispering a phrase to someone, and that person repeats it to the next, and so on around the circle.

The last person then says the phrase out loud, and frequently it is very different from the original. The same theme might remain, some of the ideas might come through, but the initial statement isn't there. I think that's one of the dangers of just listening to people who are interpreting. You can really see it in the reformed tradition. Calvin will say one thing, and then somebody will interpret Calvin a certain way, and somebody else will interpret the interpretation, and you begin to get a message that diverges from what Calvin originally said.

As we think about what we listen to and what guides us, I think we have to remember that we can actually go back to Jesus. We don't have to listen to everyone in between. Or, as we listen to everybody in between, we should also go back and listen to Jesus. We don't have Jesus here before us to tell us exactly what he said, so we go to the Gospels. We go to scripture to hear what Jesus said. But even that isn't without its interpretation. Simply moving from the Greek to the English is one of those interpretations. Is there a way to listen to Jesus where we don't just decide that a certain version of the Bible says *this*, so therefore that's what Jesus said? I think there is. I think we can begin to listen to different versions and begin to get the gist of what was being said. Sometimes we have to listen more broadly, listen to the whole of the story, to hear it and to hear how God might speak in and through those Gospels, and to get to know Jesus. So that's one piece of it. We have to listen broadly and we have to let that story talk to us.

There's something else. One reason it's fun to listen to interpreters is because we want to hear something new. When we become familiar with something, we look for a new way and we let go of the familiar. We don't value the familiar quite as much. In the book, *Anam Cara*, John O'Donohue writes,

In a book of conversations with P.A. Mendoza, a Columbia writer, Gabriel García Márquez, when asked about his 30-year relationship with his wife, Mercedes, said, "I know her so well now that I have not the slightest idea who she really is." For Márquez, familiarity is an invitation to adventure and mystery. Conversely, the people close to us have sometimes become so familiar that they have become lost in a distance that no longer invites or surprises. Familiarity can be quiet death; an arrangement that permits the routine to continue without offering any new challenge or nourishment.

What I want to suggest is that, particularly as we gather for church, we say, "I've heard that before. I know what Jesus said." If we let it become that kind of familiarity, we don't really keep paying attention. That leads me to where I want to go with the question of how we look at Jesus. I think there are some things we can do. We can recognize that we're not going to find Jesus in one piece of scripture, but in the whole story of who he is. I think that Jesus basically says the same thing. Whenever he tells a parable, he says you need ears to hear. How do we get those ears to hear? One is that we don't let the familiarity shut our ears. If we're going to listen to Jesus, we have to pay attention. We have to let that familiarity be something that takes us into that place of recognizing that there's always something new and wondrous ahead, rather than assuming we know it all. Keep paying attention. As we read the scripture from

Romans, Paul was talking about the wonder of who Jesus is. There is plenty of reason to pay attention to who Jesus is and what he does.

We can pay attention, but then we have to listen. Listening involves reading what he said, hearing it. We have to pay attention to it. We have to listen and be willing to hear. But when we really hear somebody, it's more than just listening. Sometimes I'm afraid I can listen, but if I don't think that person has anything to say do I really hear? So not only do we have to pay attention and listen, we have to be willing to think that Jesus really has something to say to us. We have to trust that what he might say is important.

We have to pay attention, we have to listen, and we have to trust that he has something that really is important for us to hear. It's hearing in a Biblical way, where hearing is not just gathering of information, but when we hear something it changes us.

If we're going to let Jesus be our founder, the one we follow, we're not going to let everything that has gone in between get in the way. We're going to allow him to speak to us and we're going to listen to his voice, be the sheep that hear him as in that passage from John. The sheep know his voice. How do we know his voice? We have to pay attention and listen, think that he really has something that we need to hear, and to allow what we hear to change us or to lead us or to move us.

As we make our way through life, I think we have a guide if we come humbly and pay attention, listen, and believe that he has something to tell us, and that in telling us he will lead us in a way that I would never go on my own because I can't see it. I don't want to make those wrong decisions, go on those wrong paths. I believe I need to pay attention, listen, recognize he has something for me, and let it change me.

In some ways it's simply saying that Jesus is the Way. I invite you this week to do that. Think about how you might pay attention, listen, recognize he has something to say, and see where it might change your perspective, give you a little guidance, and help you see something in a new way. Take something that you have been struggling with and ask that you might see it in a new way, or in his way.

Jesus is pretty incredible. I think it's important that we hear him. Amen.