

“Who Do We Follow?”  
Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23;  
1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10: 1-10

May 3, 2020  
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I've been thinking about who we follow. This passage from John talks about the sheep following the shepherd. Who do we follow? I found that one of the largest followings is for a soccer player. Cristiano Ronaldo is his name. The rest of us probably recognize other names more easily. Somebody like LeBron James, or Tom Brady, or Stephen Curry. People follow those athletes who have achieved success in their fields, in their own sports.

In second place on Instagram behind Ronaldo is Ariana Grande, with 181 million followers. A lot of people following her. The top 50 Instagram accounts are all entertainers or sports figures, except for about four. One of those is NASA, one is National Geographic, and there are a couple of others.

As I think about why people might follow those folks, I look and see who's there, and the whole Kardashian/Jenner family seems to be there. What is it that following them provides? Is it just more entertainment? I do wonder if there is, in some sense, a desire in following those folks in order to be like them. Do followers wonder if there's some way they could be like them? A desire that may leave us wondering about our own lives, perhaps. Perhaps my premise is off base. Maybe it's all entertainment. But I do think people are looking for direction, for an understanding of where we might go, and what we might do, and how we might live our lives. We look to see how other people are living theirs.

I think another place we look are Ted Talks. It's interesting that by November of 2012, there had been a billion views of Ted Talks on ted.com. A billion views. What are people getting from Ted Talks? The most popular Ted Talks include How to Be a Great Leader, The Power of Vulnerability, Looks Aren't Everything, What Makes for a Good Life, and The Happy Secret to Work Better. Those are the five most popular Ted Talks according to ted.com. It suggests there's something there about trying to learn how we might live our lives, be successful, have better choices, be happy, and work better. I think Ted Talks are useful. There is a lot of good information that we can find. But are Ted Talks enough? And how do we feel when we can't live up to the Ted Talks we hear? What if I find it hard to be vulnerable? What if I don't have the most successful leadership style? What if I can't fully implement the secret of working better or making my life a good life? How can I end up feeling?

It feels to me that what Ted Talks can't give me, what I can't find there, is the forgiveness I need, the assurance of my own value and worth. I don't think Ted Talks

are going to walk me through grief and help me endure the suffering. They are not going to help me walk through the valley of the shadow of death and not fear evil. I think there is something more.

There is a story of a young Spanish fellow back in the 1500s. I guess he was quite a dashing fellow. He was quite proud of his good looks. He was a courtier in the king's court. He was sure that he was quite something. Indeed, he had a lot of courage. There is a story of him helping hold off the French with just a few people as they were trying to take over a town near him. But in that battle his leg was shattered by a cannon ball. All of a sudden, all of his carousing, all of his good looks, all of the pomp and circumstance of his life fell apart. He wasn't able to go anywhere. In a way, he was trapped at home, trapped in the castle that he had grown up in. So, he began to dream. He began to dream about the things that he could do. He tried to find books that were romantic and chivalrous stories. The only other book that was available to him was an illustrated life of Christ. So, he read that, too. He found that after he read his chivalrous, romantic stories, he felt empty and hollow. What he needed was more of those books to take his mind off that emptiness for a while. Then he found that when he read the scriptures, the story of Christ, that he was left with a feeling that was satisfying. His thoughts about trying to serve that Lord didn't leave him empty, but gave him a fullness, a desire, a way of seeing the world that seemed very different than the life he had lived. He gave up on being handsome, on being popular, on being powerful in the court, and being famous through his looks and abilities. You might say he gave up on being a Kardashian. Instead he found that in the very scriptures he had been reading, in the life of Christ, he found the story that helped him understand, helped him to see what kind of enclosure he had put around his life, and how it had left him empty. He needed a way out, and for him, Jesus was indeed that way out. He found the Good Shepherd, the one that opened the gate, the one who led him to a new life.

The person I'm talking about is St. Ignatius of Loyola. He was the founder of the Society of Jesus. We tend to call them the Jesuits. He went on to put together what we call Ignatian spirituality, inviting us into a life that recognizes Jesus as one who engages us in life. A shepherd whose voice we can hear, and as we respond to that voice, we are led into life. Indeed, he truly found a genuine, and real, and good life in Jesus. He found that life looked very different.

It seems to me the disciples also found that. If we read in Acts, we recognize that what they were doing was very different than what society generally tells us to do. What society generally invites us to do can leave us empty. It can leave us needing something more to cover our emptiness. The world often suggests that we aren't of much value unless we are one of those famous, successful people. Instead, what the disciples did was simply devote themselves to learning from faith leaders, the apostles,

and attending to real fellowship. Growing in Christ through the leader teaching the faith, and through attending to real fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers.

It's a very different way that we are invited to than the initial life of Ignatius or the life it feels we are so often invited into—a life of excitement, a life based on fame, on good looks, on having the right information and being the best. It's not that some of that same information isn't used; rather, it is about where our value and worth come from. The disciples found that it is from Jesus. This idea that God would come to be among us – there is something about this moment that shifts all of history and certainly is able to shift our lives, change us and engage us in something different, open the gate into something new. It's described as a pasture. It's described as a place that's beside the still waters and the green pastures. Even if we have to go through the valley of the shadow of death, we have one who will walk with us, who goes along with us so that we need not fear evil. God came to us to engage us, to show us that there is a different way to life, a different way from trying to emulate the famous or blaming others for our problems. In some ways, Jesus' whole death had a sense of humankind blaming an innocent victim for not doing it right. He was going to cause problems with their lives. He was the cause. He was going to be the one that made everything fall apart. So instead, they blamed him.

It says in Acts that by his wounds we have been healed. We recognize that we blame, or we reach for what we cannot have, or we reach for what is not satisfying, or we go on these wrong paths and wrong unhelpful ways of living. Jesus invites us to recognize that we will never find our value, we will never find our worth, we will never find our purpose, we will never find our meaning in all those other paths. But it is through our experience of God's grace, our recognition that our mistakes do not define us as children of God, that God will lead us past and beyond them into life. Indeed, it says Jesus came so that we might have life, and have life abundantly.

Like Ignatius and like so many who have gone before us, I believe we, too, will find that in Jesus, as we continue to turn to him, listen to him, learn from him, walk with him, we will be led into life, and life abundantly. First Peter puts it another way. He frees us from our sins. He frees us from our mistakes, that we might live for righteousness, for the right relationship, for the fullness of life.

So that's this passage. It is about Jesus and how it is turning to him, following him, trusting him, letting him open the gate for us – even in a time of pandemic – that we might live and have life abundantly. Amen.