**Are You following Jesus?**

Jesus asked us to follow him, to love others the way he loved those around him. He didn’t really ask us to believe certain things about him, or for that matter to develop a theology around the significance of his death and resurrection. That would all come later from the apostle Paul and church institutions. So the primary question we need to ask ourselves is whether we are actually following Jesus, based on who he was, what he taught, and how he modeled behavior for us to emulate. Beyond this, we should also look at the leaders we choose to follow in today’s world to see how closely their worldview and platforms match that taught by Jesus.

First, we must assess whether we and the leaders we choose are self-centered or other-centered. I would venture that most of us are focused on what other people can do for us. We have plans on how to succeed, achieve, climb the proverbial ladder, and make more money and the primary way we do that is by using the people around us to attain those goals. Many of us accomplish a significant degree of success by those standards but still feel empty. Jesus clearly teaches that an abundant life and genuine joy, a joy that resides within us despite life’s trials and tribulations, will only come through focusing on others, especially the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. We see this in his teachings, found in places like the Beatitudes, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20 1-16), and many others. We see it in his treatment of sex workers, the adulteress, the tax collectors, the Samaritan woman at the well, lepers, and the “possessed” man in the Decapolis.

We also focus an incredible amount of time on acquiring prestige. We want others to think we are really something special. This need arises from a great deal of insecurity. Jesus teaches us that we are all beloved children of God and therefore inherently special, worthy, and valuable. When we truly accept that, there becomes no need to waste our precious time trying to build up our image. The transformed Christian also recognizes that there are many in our world with poor self-esteem, some even living with guilt or shame, that need to hear the message that they too are beloved and worthy.

Much of the focus in our world is on acquiring possessions and affluence. Think about it. All the commercials on TV and all the ads on billboards and in print and digital media tell us that we need more stuff, and not just any stuff, but the best, largest, or most expensive stuff. And what do we do when we get too much stuff? We rent a self-storage unit to store our stuff so we can go out and buy more stuff. How similar is this to Jesus’ parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21). We do this despite Jesus telling us we should store up our treasures in heaven and not on earth (Matthew 6: 19-21). If you are a disciple of Jesus, your focus should instead be on people and building relationships and communities. It would be on the solidarity of humanity, a concept that extends our sense of family to include the entire human race, a concept in which we strive to make sure everyone has enough, not necessarily the same, but enough. The focus is on generosity with what we have, not hoarding. The focus is on acts of kindness and compassion toward those in need. It is finding someone who is experiencing darkness and walking through that darkness with them until they are back in the light. It is giving people hope and letting them know they are not alone in their difficulties. We see this time and again in Jesus’ behavior and teachings. It is summarized in what is perhaps his only true parable of judgment, the parable of last judgment (Matthew 25:31-46).

Are you someone who seeks a position of power and control? How about the leaders you follow? How often in your life do you want to dominate what is occurring. We often want to be in charge and control of others. However, Jesus makes it clear that the greatest among us are those that serve. He emphasizes the point at what is commonly referred to as the “Last Supper,” washing the feet of his disciples (John 13: 5). He points it out again whenever his disciples push him about who among them will be the greatest.

What do you do when you are wounded or hurt by someone? Do you look for revenge and retaliation. Do you seek retribution? That is not the path that Jesus teaches us. We are to look for how the relationship can be repaired, how it can be restored. We seek to give and receive forgiveness. Jesus teaches us to forgive in the same way God forgives us with God’s infinite grace as demonstrated in the parable of the lost son (Luke 15 11-32). Peter asks Jesus if forgiving someone seven times is sufficient and his reply is not seven but seven times seventy (Also translated as 77, Matthew 18: 21-22), in essence an infinite number of times. When hurt do you ask, “Who is going to pay the price,” or do you ask, “Where is the hurt? How can the hurt be repaired? Who can repair the hurt? How can the relationship be restored?” Jesus seeks the second option (Matthew 5: 23-24).

How do you respond to violence in the world? How do you want your leaders to respond? Do you respond to violence with more violence or try to respond with love and a peaceful solution. Jesus clearly teaches us to respond with love (Matthew 5 43-47, Luke 6: 27-36). When Peter strikes the servant of the high priest who comes to arrest Jesus, Jesus tells him to put away his sword for those who draw the sword will die by the sword (Matthew 26: 51-52). There are leaders who have modeled this kind of love amid violence like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He realized that love is the only power strong enough to transform your enemies into friends. If you believe in a God of grace, then you must try to let the unconditional love associated with that grace to flow through you, especially when and where you encounter violence.

As we see from our above discourse that Jesus has laid out a path to follow, often referred to as “the way”, if we are to acquire abundant life in accordance with the will of God. Following this path is what will bring us joy and peace. It is the path that reconnects us with God and reconnects us with each other in the way that God intended. However, it is not an easy path. In fact, Jesus states, “The gate is narrow, and the path is hard that leads to abundant life.” As Jesus points out to Nicodemus, it requires dying to one way of living and being reborn with spirit from above into another way of living, a way of living that is often distinctly different in its priorities from that with which we are accustomed. More often than not, we will fall off that path so we should seek out friends and leaders who will help us along the way. We need spiritual friends who will lovingly hold us accountable when we start to veer off the path and will lift us out of the ditch when we fall off the path. We need to read and then re-read the Gospels to constantly remind us of Jesus’ teachings of what we need to do to bring the “Kingdom of God” (how the world would look if God reigned in the hearts and minds of humanity) into fruition. We need to engage in contemplative practices like prayer and meditation daily. We need to join a non-judgmental, inclusive church to help guide us and seek out pastors and spiritual leaders who are focused on bringing Jesus’ worldview into that community and beyond.

One of the most powerful tools we have is to elect leaders of our communities, states, and nation who embody the true spirit of God as exemplified in Jesus. If you are following a leader who is self-centered, greedy, and focused on affluence, possessions, prestige, and power, then you are promoting the very antithesis of Jesus’ plan for the world. If the leaders you follow engage in violent rhetoric and lash out at anyone who hurts them, then you are only bringing more hatred and violence into the world, not the love and peace God wants for God’s beloved creation.

Let us be more conscious of the choices we make. In the Lord’s Prayer we speak, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Do we really believe that? As disciples of Jesus, what are we doing to make this a real possibility. Amen.