

Without saying a word the young boy hops down the hall on one foot. Then, not long after, he starts to wave his arms wildly in the air. Everyone is watching him intently, keeping track of every move, following close behind. What will he do next? Everything the leader does, his followers will copy. That's the game - follow the leader. Those who were behind the boy didn't know what actions they were going to do until they saw him do the next one. Even if the group thought what the boy was doing was silly, they were doing their best to emulate him. That's the game - follow the leader. When you lead you get to set the course. Being here, gathered in a church, there's a good chance you recognize who your leader is. Today's gospel lesson specifically provides encouragement to

**Follow the Leader, Jesus!**

**Stand by what he says**

**Stand by who he is**

We see from the reading that Jesus had gained many followers, what our text calls disciples, who walked along with him on his travels and listened to his teaching in the city. Recently, Jesus had performed a great miracle by feeding 5,000 folks (probably even more) with just five loaves of bread and two small fish. This caused great excitement among the people and brought in a number of followers who were amazed at what Jesus had done. Wouldn't you be? As he taught, Jesus continued to proclaim amazing things. He said, "The work of God is to believe in the one he has sent!" He claimed, "I have been sent from heaven!" and he assured his listeners, "I provide eternal life!"

The crowd that followed Jesus didn't blindly walk behind him, ready for the next place, ready for the next teaching, without considering his message. In fact, Jesus said something troubling which caused the big group to pause. He asked the crowd, "Does this offend you? Just imagine if you saw me ascend to where I was before! The Spirit gives life, the flesh counts for nothing." Let's look closely at that. If we were to take a body by itself there's no life there unless there's a soul. So in the same way, there's no spiritual life in a person unless the Holy Spirit gives that person life. The flesh, has life, yes - physical life, but it searches after that which is not as important. The flesh wants the things of this world, the clothes, the food, the pleasure, all that is fleeting. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, creates faith and makes a person mindful of spiritual matters, that which is lasting, and has benefits that far outweigh those that the flesh could find.

Jesus goes on, "The words I have spoken to you - they are full of the Spirit and life!" He pushes the anxious crowd one step further by insisting that the very words he speaks are powerful, spiritually minded, and able to give life. The people that stood before him, well they were alive! Didn't they have life already? What was their leader getting at? He was talking about a relationship. Jesus was talking about new life that would be established, a relationship that had been broken by sin was to be restored by him. A relationship that would be restored by his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus would give them life, life that would last beyond their earthly years - that is what his words were capable of - bringing life and the Spirit to hearer's hearts.

Think of a classroom going over a math problem. You're sitting there in the back of the room and you're completely lost. You don't understand how to do the problem in your textbook. Your first reaction is probably not, "Well this book must have it wrong!" Unless you have a very high opinion of your own abilities and assume that the book has misled you... no! You trust the material. You're not thinking it's purposely misleading you. The material in front of you has been provided to lead you to the answer and to aid your understanding. So it is with God's Word, written down for you to give you the knowledge necessary for salvation. And the Bible has more credibility than any math textbook! So trust the material you have been graciously given!

Looking back at this section of Scripture we see there was some pressure on Jesus. It says, "For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him." Jesus realized not everyone would believe him, some who were a part of this group of disciples wouldn't stick with him and his words that are full of life. This fact didn't change his mind. Thankfully, he did not decide to abandon his message with the hope that they would stick around if he altered his message and made it easier to accept. He would not turn from speaking the truth or refuse to speak those words of life.

He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them." Another hard teaching. So, it's not our power that is going to keep us by your side? Maybe that's what the disciples were thinking. Are there any hard teachings of Jesus that make you hesitant to trust the words he's spoken? Wait, you mean if I love my father, mother or child more than God I am not worthy of him? Hold on, so it's not possible to serve both my God and my material possessions equally? But I'd lose my identity without my career. Hmm... I'm supposed to love my enemies and even pray for the ones that persecute me? Even my coworker who ridicules me for my faith? Is this the kind of leader you're willing to follow?

Perhaps another question is more appropriate. Are you aware of what your leader did for you? How he came down from heaven, leaving his own Father, to bring you into his family. How he has overcome the things of this world and strengthens you to not place your trust in material items or status but in him who grants you eternal life and puts his name on you. Best of all, how he laid down his life for his enemies, you and me, which was the greatest act of love and he even spent time praying on our behalf asking for us to be protected.

In response to Jesus' teachings recorded for us here in the book of John we hear that many of his disciples at that time turned around and left. The road was too hard. A few remained. Jesus turns, looks at them and asks, "Do you want to leave, too?" Peter speaks up about their commitment, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

It's clear the rest of the crowd had some issue with what Jesus had said to them. They became upset over a basic concept, in reality a crucial component of Christianity, namely that Jesus is the way to eternal life. This is how God reaches out to us. It's wasn't the disciples work that would bring them to Jesus. It's not our work that brings us to Jesus. God has the right tools to take care of that important task.

Let's bring it back to the classroom. You've scoured the textbook. You've looked at the problem up close, sideways and upside down in hopes of figuring things out. Now you look up at your teacher. You rely on your teacher to give you guidance. You view your teacher as someone who has the right answer and knows how to bring you to that point. This teacher is someone who likely cares about you and wants you to discover the truth. If they didn't, they must be in the wrong profession. Why would they purposely mislead you? Ok, next level. Jesus is that teacher who informs you on the most valuable subject you could be taught - the way to heaven. Isn't this the leader you would trust with your life? Do you feel safe following the leader? If so, why is it that you feel so safe?

Initially that large crowd that followed Jesus around felt pretty safe. They had received food in abundance from his hands, enough for their family many times over. But this miracle man was not simply an earthly ruler who could supply their hunger needs with a snap of his fingers. Beyond that, he was the Son of Man who had come down from heaven on a mission. A mission of full and complete salvation that would be accomplished by his perfect sacrifice on the cross and triumphant resurrection from the grave!

Now take note of Peter's response once more. "We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." Especially notice the words "believe" and "know". There's some connections to be made between our modern era and that of the twelve disciples. We share the belief exactly: who we believe in, what we believe he has done and how we've come to believe. The who - Jesus. The what, - that he is the Son of God who was sent to save sinners. The how - that the Father enables us just like he did the disciples. There's a slight difference in the "know" and think of this "know" as experience. The disciples watched Jesus perform miracles before their eyes. They walked and prayed with the Savior. You experience that Jesus is the Holy One of God by reading his Word, paging through the gospel history as we are doing right now. You receive his body and blood in the sacrament and are filled with the faith that the Spirit gives. By grace, you have come to believe and know that Jesus is the Holy One of God.

Everyone's lining up to follow the leader. It seems there will be some tough tasks ahead, but you have every confidence to join in. You trust the material, God's Word, written down for your benefit. You trust the teacher, Jesus, who is your one leader through this life, who promises you life in heaven with him. No other leader could offer you the same. No other leader could even come close! What the world wants you to follow might seem attractive at times: here's wealth! Here's human recognition! Other options might tug at you when you travel through trials of family disputes or arguments among peers, but friends don't take your eyes off of the leader, Jesus. Instead, stand by what he says and stand by who he is and answer along with Peter, "to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life!"