

**Mark 8:27-37** <sup>27</sup> Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” <sup>28</sup> And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” <sup>29</sup> He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” <sup>30</sup> And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. <sup>31</sup> Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” <sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Mark 8:27-38

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“Get Behind Me”

Rev. Amy Terhune

Back in the early part of this century, from 2000 to about 2007 or so, there was a grunge or alternative garage band out of Detroit that called themselves The White Stripes. Personally, I could never really make heads or tails out of their music, but I would occasionally hear them on the radio. In 2005, they released an album entitled “Get Behind Me, Satan” based on the words of Jesus to Peter from our scripture lesson this morning. In an interview with David Fricke in *Rolling Stone*, The White Stripes vocalist Jack White explains the album’s title by noting that entire album was about truth, especially truth that’s hard to take. That’s a provocative idea, in a sense. After all, Peter had certain been handed a dose of truth—this Messiah for whom he’d been waiting must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. Talk about truth that’s hard to take. Peter says, “No Lord, you’ve got it all wrong,” and Jesus rather pointedly reminds Peter of just who it is that’s calling the shots. Jack White goes on in the interview to note that several songs on that album reference Rita Hayworth, the gorgeous actress of yesteryear who was Latina-born Rita Cansino, but changed her name and even underwent significant appearance changes in order to seem more ‘euro-American’ and secure more leading parts. Jack White explains how, for him, she became a metaphor to illustrate ‘the shallowness of celebrity’ and the loss of self. [from Fricke, David, “The Mysterious Case of the White Stripes: Jack White Comes Clean”, *Rolling Stone* (September 8, 2005); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rita\\_Hayworth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rita_Hayworth)] I take that mean that Jack White wondered if Rita Hayworth knew who she was by the time Hollywood was done with her. He certainly seemed to think that fame and celebrity had a way of leeching self-knowledge and self-understanding. Perhaps he spoke from personal experience. Who can say?

But Jesus was one who seemed able to keep fame and celebrity from robbing him of his essential self. Who do people say I am? he wants to know. And he gets a list—John the Baptist, Elijah, prophets. Who do you say that I am? You’re the Christ, the Messiah of God. Right answer. But of course, Peter believed that meant that Jesus would be a great military strategist who would throw off

Roman oppression and establish Israel as a world power. Right answer. Wrong conclusions. Which is undoubtedly why Jesus goes on to say that we have to take up our cross and follow.

This past week, with the support and investment from our church's leadership, I embarked on the very first step in what is going to be a three-year journey before us through a program called "Creating a Culture of Renewal". It's designed to teach me how to understand and evaluate you all, and myself, in this first year, so that I can lead us through a change in congregational culture that will enable us to construct and implement a bold vision for our future. I'll confess to being a little overwhelmed by it all this past week. One my fellow classmates compared it to drinking from a firehose, although they assure us that it will become clear as we work through it step by step. I heard a lot this week about leadership – about making hard decisions, and casting big visions, and taking significant risks. And yes, I have both a calling and a responsibility to you and to God to do that in forging a path forward. But I take this moment to remind both you and myself that I'm actually the middleman. I may be leading the church, but this will never work if I don't follow Jesus.

I love what Dean Feldmeyer says about this. He writes: "The problem, you see, is that it's easier to idealize and idolize Jesus, to admire and worship him, than it is to follow him, so that's what we do. First, we idealize him. We set him up as an ideal that can never be achieved. We place him so far above us, so high on a pedestal of admiration that we know that we will never be able to do what he did or live like he lived. Well, that was Jesus, we say. And I'm not Jesus. He was perfect, after all. I can't be expected to be like him..."

"Or we idolize him. We put his picture on our walls and we speak of him in hushed tones. We affix little statues of him to crosses and hang them in our churches or around our necks. We sing of him, invoke his name in our prayers and our activities, tell the stories of our faith and study his words. Anything to keep us busy.

"The problem is that nowhere in the gospel accounts does Jesus ask anyone, ever, to admire him. The phrase, "admire me" does not appear in the New Testament. Neither does "idolize me" or "idealize me." Jesus used the phrase "love me" only twice. They both appear in the gospel of John and are followed by admonitions telling his disciples what to do. If you love me, keep my commandments. If you love me, feed my sheep. The phrase "worship me" appears only three times in the gospels – once in Matthew, once in Mark, once in Luke. But it was not spoken by Jesus. Oh no. It is spoken by Satan as he tried to tempt Jesus early on in ministry. Jesus asks his followers to believe in him only five times and three of those are in John's gospel. The other two times are in Matthew and Mark. The thing that Jesus asks us to do most often, the commandment that he utters more than any other, more than twenty times in the four gospels is not "admire me," not "believe in me," not "worship me," or "sing about me," or even "love me," but "*follow me.*" Follow me. Do as I do. Walk where I walk. Go where I go. Relate as I relate. Talk as I talk. Follow me. [3 ¶s from "The Art of Following" by Dean Feldmeyer, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Leonard Sweet puts it this way: "Even after twenty-one centuries of trying, it is hard for us to "get behind Jesus" and follow him. We may be willing to "take up our cross." But we would still like to "take the lead" on that journey. Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ, as the Messiah. But his first response to this newly identified Messiah was to try and tell him what he can and cannot do! [from "Do You Know Your Place?" by Leonard Sweet, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] So today, I want to talk about the challenges of following.

To follow another requires, first of all, a certain level of trust. "Kent Crockett tells about Lt. Col. Jeff Patton, who flew as an F-15 fighter pilot in Desert Storm. On the first night of the war, his mission was to escort a large formation of fighters in bombing a chemical weapons plant in northern Iraq. The date for Desert Storm was chosen because the absence of moonlight and the high clouds helped the

attacking allied fighters from being detected by enemy defenses. Flying in total darkness, the pilots were completely dependent upon their instruments.

“Shortly after crossing into Iraq, Col. Patton's jet was "locked on" to by an Iraqi surface-to-air missile radar. He violently maneuvered his aircraft to break the radar's lock on him. His maneuver successfully broke the lock, but it created a new problem. Those radical movements in the dark threw off the balance in his inner ear (which is what happens when a person gets dizzy), causing him to become disoriented.

“His mind was telling him his plane was in a climbing right turn, but when he checked his instruments, they indicated he was in a 60 degree dive towards the ground! He was sure he was in a climb instead of a dive, and his mind was screaming at him to lower the nose of his F-15 to halt the climb. While his mind commanded him to correct the plane in one direction, his instruments instructed him to do just the opposite. Because he was flying in total darkness, he had to decide quickly whether to trust his mind or his instruments. His life depended on making the correct choice.

“Even though it took everything within him to overcome what his mind was telling him, he decided to trust his instruments. In his training, he had learned how easy it was for pilots to become disoriented, so he rolled his wings level and pulled his F-15 upward, which drew seven times the force of gravity, pulling the aircraft out of its dive. It only took a few moments to realize he had made the right decision. If he had lowered the nose of his jet like his mind had been telling him, he would have crashed the plane. Following his training to trust his instruments saved his life!

“What is true for pilots is sometimes true for us in life. God will guide the "instruments" inside our hearts through his Spirit, even though our minds may tell us to do just the opposite. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding," it says in Proverbs. [5 ¶s from Kent Crockett, *The 911 Handbook*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003, 17-18.] Sometimes, that's good advice.

Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, once said, “Trust is the glue of life. It's the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It's the foundational principle that holds all relationships.” Covey is onto something there. Trusting Christ enough to follow, even when it doesn't make sense to do so, is part of what builds the relationship. Jesus says that we who would follow him must trust him with all that we hold dear—our lives, our families, our world. We trust, even when it doesn't make sense, even when we can't see how things are going to possibly come together for God's good purposes.

To follow is also to imitate Jesus. I want to ask you all to do something right now. I want you to turn to someone sitting near you – not the people you came to church with – find someone else in the pew behind you or across the aisle – and take just TWO MINUTES to share with each other where you were on September 11, 2001. And if you've got someone with you or around you that wasn't yet born on September 11, 2001, then help them understand what that day was like for you.

Okay, let's come back together. Thank you for taking that time. I'd like to have you now call out what you remember feeling on September 11, 2001. Did you feel grief? Anger? Fear? Shock? What does shock feel like? Does it make it hard to breathe? Hard to think? Does it make you numb?

I remember watching the Today's Show on September 12, 2001 as I was getting ready to head to Port Huron, still processing everything we had been through in the previous 24 hours. Katie Couric spoke that morning about how eerie it had been to drive to work that morning. New York was silent. Traffic was worse than ever due to all the chaos downtown, and yet there wasn't a car horn to be heard; none of the usual yelling or gesturing that usually accompanies the morning commute in a big city. Cars let one another in, people drove in silence, complete strangers held hands and doors and shared food and cell phones and information. Kindness and compassion for each other was the gut human response to the pain for many. In time, life moved on, as it must. The noise and the car horns

returned. We went to war. Politics got more volatile, and America more divided. Several speakers commented on that yesterday. None of us long for another September 11, 2001. But most of us long for a world more like the one that awoke on September 12, 2001. To this day, I marvel at the ability of humankind to absorb hurt and get back up with a greater sense of empathy. It's not easy to follow Jesus because we don't want to suffer. Nobody wants it, but all of us face it. If we're going to get behind Jesus, we're going to face our share of rough choices and hard days. The question is: what do we do with the suffering that confronts us?

Jesus say follow, and that's hard stuff, because if we follow, if we do as he did, we're going to have to sacrifice, because Jesus sacrificed. He sacrificed time and energy when the crowds wouldn't leave him alone. He sacrificed reputation and took on stress when the religious leaders of his day berated him. He invested himself in people emotionally, and they broke his heart. He cried, he got angry, he got exasperated. Even his own disciples let him down. But still he loved. And ultimately, of course, he gave his life. He died for you and me – to save us from sin, to show us what love is, to defeat the forces of hate and death. And what he asks is that we follow. Die to self and live to life. To follow Jesus is to imitate Jesus. So maybe the question we should ask ourselves today is not "where were you on September 11, 2001?" but rather, where are you now? We said of that day that we would never forget. We'd never forget the lives lost, the sacrifices made, the heroes that rose to meet the moment. But what is it that we want to remember? It can't be just the smoke and the fire and the destruction and the waste! We want to remember the compassion, the humanity, the sense of community. Jesus calls us to hope and to trust that the world can be better than it is, even if we can't see how to get there. It's slow going, but we trust. Jesus casts a vision that few of us can fully take in. It spans centuries, after all. What Jesus wants is to live in each of us – to have our lives be the proof that love is stronger than hate, that grace is more durable than guilt, that life rises beyond death.

Jesus told his disciples: I'm going to suffer and so will you. We can fear that. We can back away from it. But if we do, we lose something of the most precious pieces of life. Or we can let it build our empathy, we can use it to offer hope and do good, we can keep it in perspective by remembering the blessings in our life. To follow is to trust even when we can't see it and to suffer without becoming insufferable. Jesus calls us to follow, but it does not come naturally.

"Years ago, Bishop Reuben Job told about an experience in his own family. He said, "One day I went to pick up my son who was 14 years old and competing in a track meet. I didn't get there to see him run the race. But I was there to pick him up. As he came out of the gate, I could just tell that it hadn't gone well. That morning he had left and said, 'Daddy, I feel great. I had a good night's sleep. I'm training and I feel like I really will do well today.' He doesn't normally do too well in track – I think he has won two races in 10 years – and that day as he came to the car, I could see it had not gone well.

"I thought we could get it over with and so I said, 'Son, how did you do?' And he replied, 'The worst I have ever done.' I said, 'What went wrong? You thought you would do better.' He said, 'Well you see, Daddy, it's like this. I run the 330. And at the school, we train on a 330-yard track. Here, today, the 330-yards were staked out on a 440-yard track, and I misjudged the race. I started off easy, saving myself, and I started running real hard too late. The race was over too quick, and when the race was over I had too much left. I hadn't used all I had.'" [original source unknown, 2 ¶s adapted from "A Pair of Ducks and Abundant Life" by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

The last thing any of us really wants is to arrive at the last breath of our life and find we didn't use all we had. Who do you say that Jesus is? Can you trust when you can't see it? Can you do as he does and go as he goes, even if it hurts? Have you hope to run alongside your memories? Where are you now? And for the love of God and all you hold dear, can you get behind Jesus? As usual, I'll have to leave those questions with you. Amen.