
Following the Founder

Mark 9:38-50

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, September 30, 2018,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

The Mission Statement for Duke University puts a special emphasis on leadership. In the opening lines, it says, "James B. Duke's founding Indenture of Duke University directed the members of the University to 'provide *real leadership* in the educational world.'" And then, at the end of the mission statement, it says, "...Duke University seeks to engage the mind, elevate the spirit, and stimulate the best effort of all who are associated with the University; to contribute in diverse ways to the local community, the state, the nation and the world; and to attain and maintain a place of *real leadership* in all that we do." The bookends of the University's mission statement point to the aspirations of Duke to be a real leader. This is not surprising for a world class, research 1 university. We want to lead the world in every sector of society. This may work for a university but I wonder if it works for Christianity.

I want to suggest today that Jesus doesn't call us to be leaders; he calls us to be followers. Duke wants to make leaders but Jesus wants to make followers! Jesus beckons his disciples over and over to "Follow me" (Mark 1:17). Yet, we build books and institutes around the idea of leadership education. What about followership education? Perhaps, we need to learn how to be better followers. Apparently, this is not en vogue with the disciples, the students of Jesus. The disciple John tells Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." "We tried to stop him because he was not following us." The disciples want to lead and be followed, rather than paying attention to the One they should be following. All of their attention has been on leading because everyone wants to be a leader. People think there's so much glamor and glory and gains in leading but many don't consider the losses or the costs of leadership. The disciples don't. They seem to only be concerned with who is the greatest among them (Mark 9:34). They view their discipleship as being all about leadership and an ascent to heights only matched by God but when you follow Jesus, it is a descent, a movement in which one empties oneself even to the point of death. We see this with Jesus all throughout the Gospel of Mark as he predicts his death and resurrection. The Gospel of Mark is a journey downward to the burial of Jesus only to end with a measly 8 verses about the resurrection. Maybe that's where real leadership actually takes you—to the grave! Jesus is a dead man walking through the pages of Mark's narrative but the disciples seem only to be fixated on the person who "was not following us."

The irony is that the disciples should not be followed. Jesus should. And Jesus tells them, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me." Just because he wasn't following them doesn't mean he had to be a fool or a foe. He might have been just as faithful as them; just because others don't follow us, doesn't mean they aren't for us or Jesus. There are other ways to follow Jesus than our own. Our way is not the only way to follow nor are they supposed to be following us; they should be following Jesus. Yet we try to stop anything that is different from our own understanding or belief often from fear, and then demonize it, and then act as if it is against us, and eventually try to stop it, even if Jesus encourages us to do otherwise. "Whoever is not against us, is for us." Even disciples, perhaps especially disciples, can forget that there are diverse people and perspectives and approaches to following Jesus; there are variations on a theme and the variety may not look like us, act like us, think like us, sound like us, but they are followers of Jesus. When it comes to Christian discipleship, we are not the leaders; we are the followers. Followership is vital, though it may be rare in our common discourse. And remember, there are no leaders, if there are no followers for leadership implies followership.

Apparently, the disciples don't get this. All throughout the Gospel of Mark, they seem to be clueless because they just don't understand what Jesus is doing or saying. They may need a refresher course in followership education (can we please start this at the Divinity school?!). The disciples don't get it, yet they want others to follow them as they lust after leadership and frown on followership. And because of the broken human condition, if we follow each other, if they follow us, we are bound to have problems. Just look at what's happening in the public square over sexual misconduct and assault and related allegations and the perpetuation of a rape culture. Just look at how we treat women and children and immigrants and the other. Just look at how we struggle to tell the truth and love lies. We don't need another hashtag movement or rally, we need to learn how to follow Jesus and what it means to follow Jesus and go where Jesus goes. If these public displays of human beings as wounded animals tell us anything, they tell us that none of us should be followed. If anything is confirmed by what we see, it is that none of us should be followed. Yet we so often want people to follow us like the disciples did—follow our political leanings, follow our theological treatises, follow our ethical standards, follow our way of life because we think we should be followed--the way we do it, the way we worship, the way we pray, the way we think, the way we serve and so we try to stop anything or anyone not following us. The question today then is not, "Who or what are you leading?" but "Who or what are you following?"

On this Founders Sunday, I find it informative to look back at some of the early documentation of Duke University and its Founders, as we build on their legacy and leadership and dare I say, followership. In her 1985 address at the Founders' Society Dinner, Mary Semans, the granddaughter of Benjamin Duke, who died in January 2012, told that audience, "The earliest founders of Duke University were the plain people of a rural community in the South—God-fearing, hard-working people ..." Then in the Indenture of Trust by James B. Duke, the chief benefactor of the University, he says, "I have selected Duke University as one of the principal objects of this trust because I recognize that education, when conducted along sane and practical, as opposed to dogmatic and theoretical lines, is, next to religion, the greatest civilizing influence." He also gives money to set up "a school for religious training" and says, "I advise that the courses at this institution be arranged, first, with special reference to the training of preachers, teachers, lawyers and physicians, because these are most in the public eye, and by precept and example can do most to uplift mankind..." God-fearing, religion, the training of preachers. At the heart of the root of the foundation of this university is the life of faith. The Founders were people of faith who followed the Founder of the faith. This is why we have the university motto—*eruditio et religio*.

The current aims of the University even include the fostering of "a lively relationship between knowledge and faith." To go even further into the foundation of the university, when Duke was being established in 1924, they drew upon a statement by President John Kilgo written for Trinity College in 1903 to set forth the aims of the new university. His statement placed the University's purposes within "the Christian tradition of intellectual inquiry and service to the world." And this is how it began: "The aims of Duke University are to assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the teachings and character of Jesus Christ, the Son of God..." The pursuit of knowledge and religion or piety or faith were viewed as an eternal union found in Jesus Christ. It was a faith in Jesus that founded this great university. One may argue that a university has to distance itself from its roots of Christian faith in order to flourish fully, but I would argue that the flourishing of Duke has occurred not despite its roots of faith but because of those very roots. So although we may say that we follow the lead of the Founders of this university, even as we reflect on them and honor them today, perhaps we should not follow the Founders but follow who the Founders followed.

Leadership may not be all that it is made up to be. Followership may be the desired path. "He was not following us," the disciples said, and that was actually a very good thing because he was following Jesus. Before this episode with the disciples, Jesus tells the disciples, "Take up your cross, and follow me..." (Mark 8:34). He doesn't say study me, write about me, pray with me. He says "follow me." Jesus makes followers, not leaders. The Founders of the University realized that the culmination of knowledge and religion, the integration of their intellectual and spiritual lives, were found in Jesus Christ. The focus of their followership even at the founding of Duke was on him. There

was a Christic center at the heart of the university, thus this Chapel building at the center of West campus is symbolic of the heart of faith at the core of this University.

We lose our grounding, even lose our faith, if we lose the center of our faith and forget to follow Jesus, but instead try to lead him or lead others without him. Be careful not to follow everything and everyone else but Jesus—such as our political parties or our passion for justice or our insightful research findings, no matter how important they may be. Because, we may end up focusing so much on the latest scholarly or social buzz or breaking news of our day that we forget the good news of Jesus Christ. And then we will miss the whole point of the spiritual life—following Jesus, rather than being concerned with who is following us and our own way. The marketing and business worlds are preoccupied with leadership but Jesus didn't call us to lead, he called us to follow him.

I think we need to reboot followership education and this, too, as the early documents of Duke reveal, is grounded in Jesus, because remember, Jesus didn't come to earth as a leader; he, himself, came as a follower. Jesus is a follower, too. Later in Mark, he shows that he follows God, the Father, when he says, "Abba, Father... remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14:36). Jesus is a follower, following Someone and something greater than himself. He did not come to lead; rather, we hear that "he came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45). That means he came to minister, he came to save, he came to love but he did not come to lead. Jesus shows us how to be a follower—by giving his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

And the Gospel of Mark focuses mostly on the suffering of Jesus and very briefly on the resurrection, as I noted earlier. That means, if you follow him, it is not an escape from the realities of our common life or the public square; rather, it's a deeper immersion or descent into it because you'll go to the place of suffering. You'll go to the venue of all victims of sexual, racial, political, and economic violence and abuse. You'll go to the cross. You'll go to where you can meet and serve the suffering ones in our world. This is where you will go, not because it is your civic duty or your volunteer hours in a nonprofit organization or your local congressman or community organizer told you to do it, but because you are following Jesus. Jesus doesn't need more leaders; he needs more followers. And I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back. How about you?