

“Yes, we are leaders...and we are followers.”

Second sermon in nine-week “Yes, And...” series: Passion + Humility
Yes, you feel what you feel...and you can practice humility.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (NRSV)

One of the most profound moments in Jesus’ journey, in my opinion, is his baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Why? Because though he is the Messiah, the Savior, the leader that God sent to earth *“to show us the way, the truth, and the life”* (John 14:6), in his baptism, Jesus shows us that he also knows *how* to follow and *when* it’s important to be a follower. Because in following, he is, in effect, leading.

Entrepreneur Derek Sivers has a brilliant way of making this point. Let’s take a look at “a moment that becomes a movement” by watching a shaky home video from the Sasquatch music Festival 2009:

<https://sivers.org/ff>



Transcript from *Leadership Lessons from Dancing Guy*:

If you’ve learned a lot about leadership and making a movement, then let’s watch a movement happen, start to finish, in under 3 minutes, and dissect some lessons:

A leader needs the guts to stand alone and look ridiculous. But what he’s doing is so simple, it’s almost instructional. This is key. You must be easy to follow!

Now comes the first follower with a crucial role: he publicly shows everyone how to follow. Notice the leader embraces him as an equal, so it’s not about the leader anymore — it’s about them, plural. Notice he’s calling to his friends to join in.

It takes guts to be a first follower! You stand out and brave ridicule, yourself. Being a first follower is an under-appreciated form of leadership. The first follower transforms a lone nut into a leader. If the leader is the flint, the first follower is the spark that makes the fire.

The second follower is a turning point: it’s proof the first has done well. Now it’s not a lone nut, and it’s not two nuts. Three is a crowd and a crowd is news.

A movement must be public. Make sure outsiders see more than just the leader. Everyone needs to see the

followers, because new followers emulate followers — not the leader.

Now here come two more, then three more. Now we've got momentum. This is the tipping point! Now we've got a movement!

As more people jump in, it's no longer risky. If they were on the fence before, there's no reason not to join now. They won't be ridiculed, they won't stand out, and they will be part of the in-crowd, if they hurry. Over the next minute you'll see the rest who prefer to be part of the crowd, because eventually they'd be ridiculed for not joining.

And ladies and gentlemen that is how a movement is made! Let's recap what we learned:

If you are a version of the shirtless dancing guy, all alone, remember the importance of nurturing your first few followers as equals, making everything clearly about the movement, not you.

Be public. Be easy to follow!

But the biggest lesson here — did you catch it?

Leadership is over-glorified.

Yes it started with the shirtless guy, and he'll get all the credit, but you saw what really happened:

It was the first follower that transformed a lone nut into a leader.

There is no movement without the first follower.

We're told we all need to be leaders, but that would be really ineffective.

The best way to make a movement, if you really care, is to courageously follow and show others how to follow.

When you find a lone nut doing something great, have the guts to be the first person to stand up and join in.¹

If you've never been to a musical festival before, now you know what you're missing!

“The best way to make a movement is to courageously follow and show others how to follow...and it was the first follower that transformed a lone nut into a leader.”

Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, may have been considered “a nut” by some – after all, he did wear camel's hair, eat honey and locusts, and hang out in the wilderness by the river yelling “repent and be baptized!” However, he wasn't exactly a “lone nut” at this point. He had followers, lots of them. In verse seven of Luke 3 we read that “crowds of people” had come to be baptized by John. As the crowds ask him what they

¹ Derek Sivers, “First Follower: Leadership Lessons from a Dancing Guy,” (11 Feb. 2010). Accessed on 13 January 2019 at <https://sivers.org/ff>.

should do to “*bear fruits worthy of repentance*” (Luke 3:8), John replies with what we would call some very Jesus-esque answers:

- “*whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none and whoever has food must do likewise*” (v11)
- To the tax collectors he said, “*collect no more than the amount prescribed for you,*” (v13)
- To soldiers he said, “*do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages,*” (v14)

These answers reveal to us that Jesus’ moral compass and his ethic of love and justice came not just from his Temple upbringing but also from listening to – and following – his cousin...who, you will recall, was just a few months his elder.

Even though we haven’t seen these cousins together since they had that joyful leaping moment together in their mother’s wombs when Mary went to see Elizabeth after her dream from Gabriel...these guys most definitely had grown up together and John really emerged as the first leader

among the two. While we today might think of John the Baptist as paving the way for Jesus because he says things like “*I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming...*” (Luke 3:16), we need to remember that he was a full-fledged leader in his own right. And he really conditioned his followers to become Jesus’ followers.

One of the most insightful things I learned on one of my trips to the Holy Land with Professor Jim Fleming is that in that well-known passage of “the Feeding of the 5,000” in Mark 6:36 when we read this verse – “*As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd...*” – what Mark is referring to is the fact that John the Baptist had just been beheaded and his followers were mourning. They were flocking to Jesus for comfort. They had lost their shepherd, their leader – John – and as with any grief, felt lost themselves.

Professor Fleming says that John’s death is a real turning point in Jesus’ own leadership. Because the mantle then has been fully passed from John to Jesus. And yet, Jesus’ ministry

was solidified enough that the people knew to go to him when they were mourning and looking for leadership. And really all of that started back at Jesus' baptism, which in Luke's gospel, is his first public moment since boyhood that we know about. He was 30 years old (Luke 3:23) when this epiphany moment happened...when Jesus' public announcement of who he was took place at his baptism.

This epiphany season, we are seeking to become more and more a "Yes, And..." improvisational people to follow our "Yes, And..." improvisational God. And so we are exploring the spiritual practices of *Passion + Humility*.

One way to think about the interplay of passion and humility is to think about the back and forth dance of leading and following. Sometimes we are to lead. And sometimes we are to follow. And as Derek Sivers showed us on the dancing video, and as Jesus will too, sometimes the best leading is really about following.

Because one of the key marks of a good leader is humility. Of knowing when is your moment to be the lone dancing guy and

when is your moment to let someone else do the dancing. At least at first.

So in this passage in Luke, we see both John the Baptist and Jesus demonstrating humility. John the Baptist shows humility by telling the people that he is not THE guy. Someone else is coming. And then, when that guy – Jesus – actually shows up, *Jesus* shows humility by being baptized by John, just like everyone else. We see his humanity, which is as much of an epiphany moment as when we learn that he is God's son. He is relatable, and even more, he *wants* to relate to us. That's why he came to earth...to relate *with* us and to relay *to* us God's love!

So yes, this baptismal moment is a humbling one – for both John and Jesus. John knows that he is passing the baton to Jesus. And Jesus knows that he is allowing himself to publicly be seen as one who is following John, and even more, as one who is following God.

In addition to this being a humbling moment for John and Jesus, it is also one full of passion. You can't get more communally passionate than John's pre-baptism speech about repentance and preparing

for the one who is to come.
And you can't get more
personally passionate than a
voice coming down from
heaven at Jesus' baptism
saying, "*You are my Son, the
Beloved; with you I am well
pleased,*" (Luke 3:22).

In this moment, we see the love
that God has for Jesus, and
really, because Jesus chose to
follow the example of baptism,
we have this beautiful moment
where baptism is redefined
because of Jesus being a
follower. He follows others into
the baptismal waters, and yet he
emerges out of them a leader. A
leader that we can all follow,
yes, and that we are to emulate
as well...so that we become
leaders in the Jesus movement
in our own day and age.

In Jesus' baptism, we see that
baptism is not just about the
repentance of sins, as John was
preaching, it is also about
belovedness and our identity as
God's children. We are marked
and named by God as beloved.
It's not that being baptized
makes us beloved, it's that the
ritual of baptism reminds us of
the fact that we are beloved by
God – always and forever.
Society and other people will
try to give us all kinds of
names: Addict, Freak, Success,
Failure, Fat, Skinny, Rich,

Poor, Ugly, Pretty, Single,
Married, Father, Mother, Gay,
Straight, Christian, Muslim,
White, Black, etc. At our
baptism, we remember that
those are not our names.
Beloved is our name. And as
our name, it is the place from
which we lead AND
follow...we are to be rooted in
belovedness.

"Beloved" doesn't mean that
life will be easy. Jesus is driven
from his baptism directly into
the Wilderness where he is
tempted, tried, and tested. And
very, very alone. It's almost as
if God knew Jesus himself
needed to know who he was
and to be reminded whose he
was.

We all do.

And that's what I love about
this passage. That in the very
moment Jesus is emerging out
of the waters a leader for us to
follow...his leadership is really
all about following God. About
always pointing beyond himself
to God. In essence you could
say: Jesus was the first true
follower of God in the sense of
really understanding the Dance
of God's love that God had
been trying to show us for so
many years. It's like Jesus
coming to earth is equivalent to
that first follower in the video

getting up to dance with the leader, who in this case is God. Jesus is the first follower that actually allows the leader's movement – God's movement – to take off in a new way. Jesus is the follower that sees and understands what the leader is doing and then takes a risk to do likewise.

And isn't this all of Jesus' life and ministry? Seeing and knowing what God's love is and wanting to follow and live in that love? And as Jesus follows and lives in that love, we in turn follow him and begin living and leading in that love too.

We even follow Jesus into the baptismal waters: "*We are buried with our Lord Jesus in baptism, and we are raised to walk in newness of life,*" (Romans 6:4). Literally this enactment of dying, of death, is a very humbling thing. It reminds us that we are followers of God, followers of Jesus. And we must die to all the ways in our life which are self-centered and self-serving.

And, humbly, when "*we are raised to walk in newness of life*" – we are reminded of our passion as Christ-followers: we are to be, as we learn in Matthew 5, "*salt of the earth*"

and the "*light of the world.*" We must "*go and shine our light brightly to the world.*"

I guess the key question in all of this is: *How do we shine our light brightly? As a leader or as a follower?*

Well, the answer is, of course, both. It's determining when we lead and when we follow that is the work of discernment and prayer and faith. And as you think of this from a spiritual perspective, try to put aside your societal understanding of being a "Leader" or a "Follower." Because it certainly seems that being a Leader is seen as superior to being a Follower in our society, right?

In a post on her blog, *Grown and Flown*, mother Melissa Fenton writes:

"I've spent the better part of the last few months helping a teenager fill out an assortment of personal applications. From college and scholarship applications, to job, club, honor society, and collegiate organizations, he's diligently had to make a personal pitch in the hopes of earning whatever position or accolade they are offering.

As I review his applications, I wonder how on earth, in two pages, can my 17 year son convey what type of person he is to a group of

strangers and why are we obsessed with “leadership roles?”

...It seems the second they leave the middle school cocoon, the frenzied race for leadership roles begins. Now, it’s not enough to just be in the group, you must be the captain, the mentor, the editor, the founder, the manager, and the director!

In every single personal application I’ve seen, there is that one question: “Please describe what leadership roles you have held, and what your duties were, and how long you were the leader, and how many people did you lead, and how many spin-off groups did you also start and lead...”

After a while all I saw was, “You DID lead, didn’t you? How did you lead? Did you leading-ly lead the other leaders into leadership led leaders? Has leading taught you to be a better leader? Is leading your major? What will you lead in the future?” because that is how silly it all started sounding.

Here is my question to the people who are reading these applications....

“If everyone is leading, who the [heck] is following?”

How refreshing would it be to see a question on an application that looked like this...

“Explain a time when you were just a regular member of a team, a group, or a club, and you did work behind the scenes that nobody noticed. You weren’t special, or boastful, or overly enthusiastic about everything, but you were just an on time,

dependable, average, and happily participating member. You kept the group quietly afloat, and nobody noticed. How?”

...Want to see the really amazing leaders? They are not the elite runners actually leading the race. Rather, they are the runners in the back of the pack, because of what kind of race they are running.

You see, while they’re back there with the average folks, they are inspiring, they are encouraging, and in their own way they are leading the people who the real leaders cannot reach. The middle of the pack runners will never keep pace with the elites, they will never have the confidence to even attempt to do so, but with a nudge from a fellow average follower, they will be inspired.

These followers, these middle of the pack runners, are much like teenagers who will never hold traditional leadership roles. Instead, with a little shove, a sly look, or a pat on the back, they can tell a peer to make a better choice, do more, give back, contribute extra, and be a more stand up person. Also, without holding the voted in position of leading role model, they have the opportunity to hold an even more significant role, the one of follower, the one that makes the group as a whole, well, actually work as a whole. They are the quiet leader, the one who during the race passes by a walker and says,

“You’re doing it. You can do it. Now start running with me.”

Nobody elects them to say that, there are no accolades that come with saying that, there is no title or badge that comes with it, there is only that unpretentious, warm and fuzzy feeling that in a very little way, you made a very big difference to someone. And you did so without standing up in front of everyone and behind a podium, but standing next to and with someone.²

Whether an expressed leader or follower, the point for us all to remember is that we are ALL first and foremost followers of Jesus. And because we are all followers of Jesus, it's essential that we lead. In whatever way we can. It's essential to our faith that we step out and take risks and be the first one to say, *"This is not right"* or *"Have you thought about this?"* or *"We need to listen to her voice"* or *"There has to be a better way."*

As followers of Jesus, we must lead the way when it comes to listening to those stories which are often overlooked or shouted over.

As followers of Jesus, we must lead the way in putting compassion above consumerism, people above profit.

As followers of Jesus, we must lead the way in listening to those with whom we disagree and having a civil conversation with them.

As followers of Jesus, we must lead the way in realizing that the safety of people will only come when the sanctity and personhood of people, from all places, is respected and honored.

As followers of Jesus, we must lead the way in reminding people that if any person is hungry, we are starving ourselves...if any person is unhoused, we are all vulnerable.

As followers of Jesus, we must lead the way in proclaiming that, as Edith Wharton said, *"There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it."*

Because of Jesus, we are both. We have the divine light within us – illuminating our gifts from within, and we are to share that divine light with the world – shining brightly on all in our path.

² Melissa Fenton, "Leadership Roles: If Everyone is Leading, who is Following?", *Grown and Flown*. Accessed on 13 January 2019 at

<https://grownandflown.com/leadership-roles-who-is-following/>.

If you've lost the flicker of the divine in you, you'll struggle to share the light. Remember – baptized or not – Jesus came to embody for us and to reveal for us that – ***“you are God’s beloved child and in you God is well pleased.”***

Believe that, and **yes** you'll naturally be a leader that others want to follow...**and** you'll be humble enough to realize there are many leaders, many gifts, many ways of shining and spreading light...so many wonderful opportunities to follow.

If there is any area of your life that you feel unsettled in...reflect upon whether or not it might be because you feel the tension of leading and following and are not sure which role to take or when to pivot in which direction?

Remember, both leading and following are essential. It's just a matter of figuring out what is needed in what moment. When you can't decide, step back and reflect, and ask yourself: in this area, what reflects my belovedness the best and allows others to be seen and heard and valued as beloved...leading or following?

Chances are...whatever makes the most people feel beloved...is going to be what pleases God...and in turn, will be pretty pleasing to you as well.

Amen.

– OR – other ending –

“The best way to make a movement is to courageously follow and show others how to follow...” and I would add, to boldly INVITE others to follow as well. Because what's not to love about our leader Jesus? He's not a lone dancing nut. True, he challenges our priorities and our comfortable way of life...AND he ensures that all people – especially the ones we tend to ignore and demean – know they are beloved...all the while forgiving *us* and loving *us* too. That's a leader's *always* worth following...because when we follow Jesus, he will always draw us back to leading lives of love...time and time again.

Amen.