

Sermon: Who We Follow

Seth C. Burgess, seminarian
Sunday, October 8th, 2017
10:00am Worship
Lyons First Presbyterian Church
11 Queen Street, Lyons, NY 14489

Scripture for the Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time¹

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Hebrews 3:1-6

The Dance

A new season is upon us! No, I don't mean Autumn. It is the 25th season of Dancing with the Stars! *What* could be more exciting?

In partner dancing, one partner needs to lead while the other follows. Much of the time, it is unimportant which person leads and which follows, so long as there is one of each—a leader and a follower. But what if it is a dance where something is at stake, like advancing to the next round? Then does it begin to matter who leads, and who follows? We are pretty familiar with the competitive format of Dancing with the Stars, where the professional dancer leads, while the paired celebrity figure follows.

Now, what if something *really important* is at stake, like life or death? How much does it matter who leads then? Even more, right? To elevate the question even more—what if the form of dance has never been perfected by anyone, except for *one*?

There is a parallel to these questions in our Christian journey, and guess what? For us, that one person is available to each one, as your leading dance partner. Let's say that we do not have a choice as to whether we are going to the dance—we are on the floor already—will you follow this one person available to you throughout the dance? Jesus' hand is extended to each one of us, always. It is really important that we know and identify *who* we follow, because it defines us, showing and explaining to the world who we are—and whose we are.

¹Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, October 8, 2017, the Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A), <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2017/10/8/>

Rules & Relationship

Out on the dance floor—at the heart of every step—is relationship. The story of God's people as captured in the writings of the Bible is also about relationship. And it is the history of God's people to struggle in relationship with their Creator. Rather than the fluidity and gracefulness of dancing that screams for a next round, there is frequent stumbling and resistance to the leading hand.

The many rules given to Israel, including the Decalogue—or Ten Commandments—are given to support right relationship with God. Yet even as soon as Moses had couriered the Ten Commandments to those freshly out of bondage in Egypt, the people's response in Exodus 20:19 is this: "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." The people are afraid by the awesome power of God, yes, and at the same time it is the seed of rebellion upon their hearts, saying "do not let God speak to us, or we will die"—a preference for human relationship and rulership that is tangible before their eyes, rather than adhering to the rules of a divine kingdom.

How different are we today, really? How easy is it for us to do a similar thing, pushing away at God's rules—the Law of Love that Jesus gave us—in deference to the leadership of strong-willed people in society, in our country? The Letter to the Hebrews speaks to a very early church exactly on this tendency to turn away from a focus on relationship with God, and looking to a human leader. It was just as important for that early church to identify *who* it followed as it is for us today, because it was communicating to a world under harsh oppression who it was, and the direction it was heading.

Remaining Steadfast in Faith

The early Church attributed the Letter to the Hebrews to Paul, while later consensus established that the letter is not Pauline. Why does it matter? In general, it encourages us to ask

the question of the purpose, the thrust of the letter. We know that Paul wrote for congregations who were very early Christian communities and it is likely the Letter to the Hebrews was also written within the first several decades of Christianity. But a different flavor is found in Hebrews that aided in separating it from Paul's writing. The Letter to the Hebrews was understood to be written for Jewish-Christians while Paul, on the other hand, was a champion for the Gentiles. This means that the audience of Hebrews included people with prior experience in another faith tradition—at least some of whom wavering on whether to remain in the Christian community. This fits the tone of Hebrews 3:1-6, which is a preface to a warning against unbelief, of reverting to a faith that is not centered on Jesus.

Moses and Jesus

In the first verse of Hebrews 3 the writer is addressing fellow Christians, and makes a point of establishing that their calling together is holy: "Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus," The writer states that Jesus was both an apostle and high priest, which is notable as the term apostle is not usually applied to Christ.

The writer continues, saying that Jesus was faithful, and points out his role as one of appointment by God. This aligns Jesus with Moses, also described as faithful—and of course a leader well known amongst those having grown up in Judaism. Remember, this was the early Church, and Jesus' life and death was recent, verses a long history of telling and retelling stories of Israel and its deliverance from the bondage of Pharaoh.

Hebrews 3:2 specifies that Moses was "faithful to all God's house," which is a clarification that begs us to ask the question, what is God's house, and is Moses faithful to this house differently than Jesus?

God's house could be taken a few different ways, but both are relevant to the differentiation the author is making between Jesus and Moses. God's house could mean the

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work of God, the things God is doing—or, it could mean God's people. In Moses' time God's people would have been Israel, and at the time of the writing of this letter, the Church, which is descended from Israel. So Moses' faithfulness is characterized by serving either what God is doing, or God's people. That sounds a bit like what it means to serve as a leader in the Church today, doesn't it?

The writer's focus on Moses then shifts back to Jesus in Hebrews 3:3. The bottom line is up front here: Jesus' glory is higher than that of Moses. A metaphor is used to explain:

“Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself.”

With God as builder of God's house, which has already been referenced in terms of Moses' faithfulness, we can then understand Jesus in direct association with the builder—with God. Moses, on the other hand, is directly associated with the house.

In 3:4, the metaphor is further made plain, the text saying that people build houses, but God builds everything. Moses' work, while faithful and good, is yet lower than Jesus' work. Continuing into verse 5, it is now more evident that Moses is a servant to God's house—the people of God, the Church. And Christ, as God's Son, reigns over God's house. The text reads:

“Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.”

Let us proclaim now that we are God's house! This is how the author of Hebrews ties back to the first verse of Chapter 3. Jesus, spiritually speaking, is superior to Moses. Jesus is our head, and Moses, a God-called servant, like us.

Who We Follow

The writer of Hebrews was urging believers to understand that there's only one head of God's house, and it is Jesus. *Jesus is at the center*. Even turning to follow primarily one so faithful as Moses is warned against—for after all, Moses serves the house of God just as we are called to. Brothers and Sisters, it is crucial that we clearly identify *who* we follow, because it tells the world who we are each becoming, every day. As Christians in today's age, in these last weeks even, this is huge.

What does a church leader look like in today's world? In our American society? In our present situation, which includes news headlines that rile us up, like what NFL teams are doing before a game? In our raw sorrow, dejected in response to what has occurred in Las Vegas----now being called the worst mass shooting in U.S. history?

When we state our feelings and opinions on any issues raised out of such real life events, do we realize who we are following? When the public discussion turns to nationalism when the issue at stake should be racial injustice, where does our voice fit in? What have we said, what have we done, and who are we following in those small words and acts? When debate returns to headlines regarding gun control, do our own thoughts and words follow a partisan agenda, or are we thinking and discerning in light of the kingdom of God?

Who we are in primary relationship with in our walk as Christians, matters. Keeping Jesus at the center of our faith and the center of our lives affects health and life and wholeness, for us, and those around us. We must know who we follow. It declares our witness to God's love. It changes the world. Amen.