

“Trying to keep up”

1. Everyone has people who have influenced them, who they are, how they live
 - a. Recently I heard a radio interview with the talented guitarist Carlos Santana
 - i. In it he mentioned that he had been influenced from an early age by the playing of guitarist and Indianapolis native Wes Montgomery
 - ii. “[The first time I heard Wes Montgomery was at a friends’ house] I went to a friend of mine, and at that time, we had records, we didn't have cassettes or 8-tracks or anything, all we had was records. So we went to the house, and when we played hooky, we hung out with people who had records. So they had three records: Wes Montgomery, the Beatles’ Sergeant Pepper's, and Jimi Hendrix’s Bold As Love.” <https://www.wfyi.org/news/articles/carlos-santana-on-the-influence-of-indianapolis-jazz-guitarist-wes-montgomery>
 - iii. I try to picture a school-age Santana, messing with his guitar at home, trying to imitate the innovative jazz sound which Montgomery was producing.
 - iv. I guess I never think about how someone who is famous today had to take a long and arduous journey to get where they are today.
 - v. Where they studied, who they idolized, how many hours they practiced...
 - vi. And it may be hard to figure out who influenced them along the way.
 - vii. Fast forward to today, I am certain that there is a high school-age guitar player in a bedroom somewhere, listening to the legendary Santana on their iPhone and trying to keep up on the guitar as they try to imitate the great player, who himself had tried to match the playing of Montgomery, Henricks, BB King, and others.
 - b. When Jesus was having the conversation with his disciples recorded in today’s gospel, he was pushing the limits of how much they would let themselves be influenced by him.
 - a. One thing to note is that this story comes about halfway through this gospel
 - i. Jesus had started with healings and teaching, and he became well known
 - ii. Jesus had gathered followers along the way
 - iii. It was a bit surreal for those who followed him, especially those closest to him, because they were taking in all his teachings and watching him perform these miracles day after day
 - iv. And yet they found themselves surprised at times, at a loss for words, like the time Jesus calmed the storm while they were all on the boat. That story concludes with this line: “And [the disciples] were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’ ” Mark 4:41
 - b. Another thing to realize is that Jesus had been very cautious with the labels others used about him
 - i. This was especially true of unclean spirits who were trying to out Jesus, declaring who he really was

- ii. Like in his first healing story in this Gospel, the unclean spirit yells out: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” (Mark 1:24) (and Jesus rebuked the spirit, telling it to be silent)
- c. When we come to today’s passage, Jesus enters the topic carefully about what others were saying about him, knowing that the disciples had very much wondered the question he was asking, as I mentioned
 - i. The answers others had beat around the bush a bit.
 - ii. They labeled Jesus as the return from the dead of legendary prophets
 1. John the Baptizer (who had just been killed by Herod)
 2. Elijah
 3. Another of the prophets
 - iii. There was certainly the consensus that Jesus was a messenger from God
- d. Then Jesus poses the question directly: but who do you all say that I am?
 - i. Peter answers more truthfully than he himself may have understood
 - ii. “You are the Messiah,” Peter said
 - iii. And there it was. In this Gospel, this is the first time he’s referred to as Messiah, which was a loaded word / role
 1. The Messiah which was awaited by the Jewish community would be the anointed one from God who would liberate them once and for all
 2. Think of it as a combination of military and theological hero
 3. The Messiah would lead them to defeat their oppressors (Rome) and on to the joy which God had prepared for God’s people
 4. Imagine just how excited the disciples were that Jesus was finally owning up to this identity!
- e. But then Jesus begins to unpack what that label of Messiah was actually going to mean
 - i. He began for the first time to teach them that the Son of Woman would undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scholars, and be killed and after three days rise again.
 - ii. Imagine now how shocking this would be, considering what they thought the title of Messiah should mean! Who needs a dead leader?
- f. Suddenly the star pupil, Peter, takes the Rabbi over to the corner and starts to edit the lecture quite forcefully
 - i. It’s jarring to think of Peter shushing Jesus, rebuking Jesus (yep, that’s the same action as when Jesus silenced unclean spirits!)
 - ii. Peter takes it upon himself to tell Jesus how this whole notion of suffering, rejection, death and whatever rising again meant was the WRONG message
 - iii. You can just hear Peter lining up the argument for Jesus to drop the nice rabbi mask and get on with the serious business of removing the Roman occupation
- g. And then it’s Jesus’ turn to rebuke Peter.

- i. What good is it, Jesus asks, if you're not paying attention to what I've done, because all you wanted to do was to fit me into a pre-established mold of what Messiah means to you – you've not been watching and listening
 - ii. Afterall, he hadn't been building support for a military campaign
 - iii. He hadn't been laying the groundwork to topple religious institutions
 - iv. He had, instead, come to the level of us humans and was serving, and healing, and listening and teaching
 - v. So, he said: If anyone wants to follow after me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.
- 3. It goes without saying that none of us is perfect. Far from it. So we need God's grace and the Holy Spirit to help us keep up with Jesus ...
 - a. To follow Jesus we're called to get as close to Jesus as we are able, so that in our actions his actions and his teachings will echo
 - i. You know this joke?
 - 1. A stranger asks a person: Are you a Christian?
 - 2. The person replies. Go next door. Ask my neighbor if I am.
 - ii. We continue the work Jesus started
 - b. To deny ourselves is to put aside our interests for the sake of loving and serving others.
 - i. And yes, that's as hard as it sounds. Or harder.
 - ii. Jesus could have pulled rank, and didn't.
 - iii. And in the action of vulnerability and servanthood he upended systems and norms
 - c. And to take up our cross means to risk the consequences of pushing hard against unjust and sinful systems
 - i. Jesus didn't go looking for the cross to glamorize suffering
 - ii. The cross came looking for him because his radical message of love and justice was a threat to those who benefited from power
 - iii. In other words, be courageous in how you love and serve. And do it with open eyes that the cross will come looking for you.
 - d. Following Jesus is serious business, and here he doesn't hide the conditions for following
 - i. It's not like squinting to read the fine print in a legal contract, but rather Jesus is putting the main points on the headline, in bold
 - e. Perhaps Jesus needed to ask a second question after "Who do you say that I am?" : "How do you show others who I am?"
- 4. Like someone learning to play the guitar like a legendary performer, here we are, you and I listening to the words and actions of Jesus, and we try our best to follow, to keep up with his vulnerability and servanthood, with his bold love for all in the face of pressures to conform. It's a life-long journey, and we don't take it on alone.

Reflection questions

1. Share a story of someone who, by their example, showed you what it means to follow Jesus.
2. How do you define “following Jesus”?
3. How does it align with Jesus’ words in Mark 8:34 “If any want to follow after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”