

# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from April 5, 2009

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

### **“Follow the Leader”**

Scriptures:

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Mark 11:1-11



It always made me nervous when my friend Karen was the leader. Do you remember playing “follow the leader”? That was the game when the leader would walk ahead while others would follow in a single line behind and do everything the leader did. It soon became obvious that if we truly surrendered, we became putty in the leader’s hands. It was all fun and games until the leader did something outrageous that we were not prepared to blindly imitate. We stopped short of doing whatever it was that would embarrass us or get us into trouble.

Just the same, it always made me nervous when Karen was the leader. Karen and her dog Buffy were constant companions and she dared to do anything. She rode her bike purposely up and down curbs where I would use the convenience of driveways to smoothly enter and exit the street. In the summer time while I was clad in matching short sets, she wore the khaki kind with lots of pockets. She wore Levi’s blue jeans before anybody. And her pockets always held items of exotic interest to me: caps, stones and rocks, and bird feathers, bottle caps, chewing gum, a sling shot... I don’t think my shorts even had pockets!

So, when Karen played leader, I was scared. She would saunter ahead, with a long blade of grass protruding from her mouth—King of the Road, really. She would start off mildly enough with hand gestures or hopping on one foot. But eventually she would progress to tugging on the neighbors’ bushes as we walked by or taking the stones out of her pockets and with great precision pitching them to places that would surely attract adult attention. Some days our game ended safely when something inside me made me say, “Uh... I don’t want to play anymore.” Other days our game ended much more abruptly when we were forced to scatter and run home!

This morning we meet Jesus and his disciples outside of Jerusalem just as his disciples are daring to do exactly as their leader tells them. “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” Now the disciples had been following their leader for quite a long time now, some as long as three years, and he was becoming quite daring. Here they were heading straight for Jerusalem when he had already told them what would be waiting

there for him: betrayal, arrest, death. They kept following him, but I think with growing hesitation, don't you? "Uh... OK, Jesus, if you say so. Sure, we'll head down into the village and just take a colt."

We can imagine their hearts pounding when they spot it, and their chests tightening as they untie it, and then freezing, holding their breath when they hear the bystanders say: "Why are you doing this?" "The Lord needs it. Uh... We'll bring it right back..." Whew! Huge internal sigh of relief as they run back up to the Mount of Olives with the colt, escaping trouble once again.

How many times over these months and years with Jesus had they held their breath as they followed this leader? Those times when the Pharisees would come around and hover and harass? What about that time when they were faced with a crowd of 5,000 tired and hungry people to feed and only a couple of loaves and fish? Remember when he slept during the storm? Master – do you not care that we may perish? What about every time their leader left them alone and went off by himself to pray? Following this leader made you feel full of hope and love, but sometimes it made you feel alone and afraid, and now it was getting downright dangerous.

This notion of following the leader came into sharp focus for me a couple of years ago as I read a selection from Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard about following Christ. You may remember that I offered a quotation from his writing about this in a Sunday bulletin back near the beginning of Lent. Kierkegaard very articulately pointed out the difference between true *followers* of Jesus and mere *admirers* of Jesus. He wrote that followers strive to *become* what they admire. But admirers keep themselves personally detached, at a safe distance. They are willing to serve Christ as long as proper caution is exercised, lest they personally come in contact with danger. He said that admirers are infatuated with the false security of greatness; but if there is any inconvenience or trouble, admirers pull back.

On this day, the day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we read that many people spread their cloaks on the road; others spread leafy branches, and those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting. The Lukan version of the entry into Jerusalem says that the whole multitude began to praise God joyfully. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

think it's safe to imagine that the fear and anxiety of the disciples subsided that day. Perhaps each one was beginning to relax. Jerusalem might not be so bad. As they looked back over the previous months and years, when Jesus in frustration would say to them "You of little faith", perhaps today they felt full of faith, that they could ease up a little. No fear today in following Jesus. Amid the shouts of joy and the people joining in we can imagine them smiling as they walked: Yes, I'm with him! Oh, yeah, I've been following him for years! Oh, sure, gave up the job and family to come with him! I'm following Jesus!

We know as this upcoming Holy Week progresses they'll eventually scatter, just as we did in our neighborhood when Karen led us into danger. We ran to safety and we denied everything.

Now despite some convenient similarities, there's a big difference between the leadership of my friend Karen in a childhood game and our Savior Jesus. I highly doubt Karen would have died for me. She scattered just like we did. Our stakes are much higher. This is where we are called to examine what kind of followers of Jesus *we* really are.

Those last few days before the Passover as Jesus continued to teach, he told his disciples: "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he' and 'the time is near' –Do not go after them." This morning we are called to ask of ourselves, Who or what are we going after? What might be leading us astray? What footprint are we following – the one towards our own personal security, the so-called safe way? The one that avoids the discomfort of really examining our choices, the way we live, what we eat and where it comes from, and into whose pockets our money really goes? The path that accepts our existing systems and institutions without taking into account what Jesus taught?

Jesus says to his disciples in Luke's Chapter 21 preceding the Last Supper: "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap." Have we let ourselves become trapped into being mere admirers of Jesus, but going on our merry earthly way? Or are we actually following Jesus—are we truly trying to be just like him?

Kierkegaard wrote: "The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. He always plays it safe. Though in word he is inexhaustible about how highly he prizes Christ, he renounces nothing, will not reconstruct his life, and will not let his life express what it is he supposedly admires. Not so for the follower. The follower aspires with all his strength to be what he admires."

My dear friends, the way of Jesus in this world appears at times to be dangerous – the way of nonviolence, the way of loving our enemies, the way of reconciliation and forgiveness – between individuals, communities and among nations. But Jesus is the leader we need have no fear of following. No hesitation. This is the leader who will never betray us, who will not lead us into danger, but who will lead us to love and to peace. It is through his death and resurrection that we now have the grace to be true followers of Jesus, if we choose his way. Not just mere admirers. Not just people who will lay our cloaks down on the road or wave palms in the air as he passes by, but people who will follow him all the way to Calvary, who will stay awake in the garden, who will not deny him when it gets dangerous.

As we enter this very Holy Week of remembering his Last Supper, his betrayal and arrest, his agony in the garden, his humiliation and torture and suffering and his death on the cross, let us not merely stand by watching, admiring his faith and his love for us. Let us not skip easily from Palms one week to Resurrection the next. Yes, we live on this side of Easter and we know the incredibly joyful ending, but let us this week, put both feet firmly on the ground, and place them one in front of the other behind those of our beloved leader Jesus and never waiver. Never turn. Never shrink back from the one who says "follow me" and who will lead us through the darkness into the radiant light of eternal life. We can be a people of faith. We need not scatter and hide when the going gets tough, because we have been given the love, the forgiveness, the strength, and the truth to follow. We need not be afraid any longer. Amen.

