

## **Come and follow my leader**

John 12:20-26

April 17, 2011

I read a magazine article this week that left me feeling very sad. It was an article from the May issue of *Canoe & Kayak* magazine. Yes, *Canoe & Kayak* ... just the place you'd expect to find a literary tearjerker!

I was attracted to the article because its subject was a kayak camping trip among the Apostle Islands on Lake Superior in northern Wisconsin. Lynne and I have kayaked there and would love to paddle there again some day, and I was eager to learn more about that beautiful and magical place.

The article was written by a travel writer from Oregon, joining his girlfriend of two years for a four-day expedition among the lighthouses and sea caves of the Apostle Islands. They had been apart for six months while she took a job teaching English in Taiwan, and they met up in Wisconsin to attend a wedding and to reconnect by doing this trip together.

The story is about place -- about the islands, the lake, the weather, the paddling -- but it is as much about their reunion and their relationship, about where it might be going or not going. As the story unfolds, they encounter some rough weather, enjoy some interesting paddling, catch up on the news, and share some playful moments, as well as several tense moments of mutual irritation. He ends the story this way, describing his thoughts as they approach their takeout ...

*We don't say much. The thing about paddling trips is that there's lots of silence. It's something I've always enjoyed about paddling -- time to think, to see things more clearly. That goes double for couples, maybe quadruple for couples in a tandem kayak. For me and Kate, who've been willfully ignoring our basic incompatibility, quadruple clarity is bad math. We are separated by three feet of fiberglass but couldn't be further apart.*

*By the time the takeout ... comes into view and the first heavy raindrops make concentric rings on Superior's already ruffled surface, I realize that we just don't work well together -- my fidgety preoccupation with planning and her tendency to become lost in the moment are fundamentally at odds. My admiration for her other qualities isn't enough to overcome the aggravation, no matter how much I want it to. It seems we're just another Apostle Islands shipwreck.*

Sad! Very sad!

Not sad because their relationship isn't going to work out or because there is no happy ending, but sad because of the attitudes and expectations that surely doomed their relationship to shipwreck from the start. Now in all fairness, I have to say because of his attitudes and his expectations. We only know his side of the story. And even he recalls how she stood close to him before they launched their boat on that last morning, and said to him, "I do love you ..."

He just doesn't get it! "Willfully ignoring [their] basic incompatibility?" Is that what a healthy and lasting relationship is about? Compatibility? What about love? What about love that is patient and kind, love that does not seek its own way, love that is not selfish, love that never gives up?

It's all about him! It's all about his aggravation when she unexpectedly disappears, lost in the moment, spending twenty minutes photographing mushrooms or fascinated by bear prints on the beach. It's all about his schedule, his expectations, his need for proof that she can be responsible and accountable and there for him when he needs her.

He says he was attracted by her zaniness and spontaneity, but he sees the relationship as doomed, because she is not more like him, because they are ... incompatible!

He is doomed ... to a lonely life! I do feel sorry for him, but I feel especially sad for Kate, because this man whom she loves is unready to love her back, unready to enjoy her and appreciate her for who she is.

So what does this have to do with Palm Sunday? Everything!

How does Jesus enter the city of Jerusalem? Riding on a donkey. Why? It's an enacted symbol, a self-conscious embrace by Jesus of the way of humility. Palm Sunday is all about him. The people are right to shout their praises and to proclaim him Israel's king. But for him, it is not all about him.

For him, it is all about what he has come to do. And what has he come to do? Die. He has come to die.

Every one of the four gospels make it clear, that though it is the choices and attitudes and fears and jealousies and spiritual blindness of people among the Jews and the Romans alike that lead to Jesus' arrest and execution, none of this takes him by surprise. Jesus knows what awaits him in Jerusalem, but he goes anyway. He goes to fulfill God's purpose, because the hour has come.

The hour has come for him to receive great glory ... to receive great glory by dying! There is no glory in dying in and of itself, but there is glory in dying for the sake of love, in dying for the sake of friend and foe alike, in dying for the sake of all humanity, in dying for the sake of love for every human being, for each human being, for you.

*A grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies.*

Jesus is that grain of wheat, giving up his life for the sake of the life that will be given to so many others because he gives up his own. Jesus gives himself away, empties himself, loses his life, in a glorious act of love for us and obedience to God.

Come and follow my leader!

Do you want to? Let's just be clear -- this is where he is going!

Some Greeks approached Philip. They wanted to see Jesus. We want to see Jesus! At least, that's what we've been saying and singing all the way through Lent -- *Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus!*

But when we do see Jesus, this is what we will see. And when we do listen to Jesus, this is what we will hear.

*Those who love their own life will lose it ...*

Those who are all about themselves, all about their own needs and wants, all about their own expectations, all about needing people to adjust to them, to be compatible with them, to serve them in the ways they think they deserve to be served -- the life they want so much? They will lose it!

But

*those who hate their own life in this world will keep it for life eternal ...*

Hate their own life? Now I'm not going to pretend this doesn't mean what it seems to mean or try to explain it away, but doesn't it seem that Jesus is using such dramatic language to vividly distinguish two entirely different ways of living -- living for ourselves, for our own gain, or living for the sake of everybody else?

Does Jesus hate his own life? Well, yes, if what we mean by that is that Jesus loves you and me and everybody more than his own life, enough to give it up for you and me and everybody.

It's a paradox, the astonishing and wonderful and life-giving paradox of God's way.

Is Jesus a king? Most certainly, yes! But how does he validate his kingship? By becoming the servant of all.

Does Jesus ride into Jerusalem as a conqueror? Most certainly, yes! But how does he win the victory? By weakness, by humility, by sacrifice.

Is life God's gift, a precious and wonderful gift to be desired and treasured as long as we have it? Most certainly, yes! But how do we hold on to it? How do we win the right to enjoy it, not just for this fleeting moment, but for always? By giving it away.

But we don't see it. We don't see the paradox. We don't see Jesus. We turn God's way upside down and inside out! We think that faith should pay us dividends. We think that Jesus should make our lives easier. We think that being believers should make us special and set us above the rest of ignorant and rebellious humanity. And we think that it's our job to show the unfortunate masses the error of their ways.

But it's our job to follow Jesus. Come and follow my leader!

And this is where he is going: into Jerusalem, into the midst of those who love their own lives and hate him, into the midst of those who are hungry and thirsty for life and hungry and thirsty for love, but don't know where to begin to look for them.

This is where he is going: to the cross, to that place that spells weakness and suffering from our human point of view, but spells victory and healing from God's point of view.

This is where he is going: down the path of love, all the way.

Come and follow my leader!

Follow him into the midst of a hungry and thirsty world, offering good food and good drink!

Follow him to the cross, to your cross, to the place where you are ready to give up something or even everything to bring another person healing or blessing or dignity or peace.

Follow him down the path of love, all the way, not forging relationships that serve your own wants and needs, but forging relationships that let you serve people like Kate and Lynne and Craig and Lois and Paul and Margaret and Steve and Emilia and DeShaun and Pierre and Li Chen and Mohammed and Punam and Karla and Amir. Because when you serve them, you serve Jesus. Because when you serve them, you follow Jesus.

Come and follow my leader! You do know where he is taking us?