



Minister
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29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Matthew 23: 1-12

Discipleship

Discipleship is a “churchy” word. It is religious talk, and marketing people would tell a preacher these days never to use such language in church, as it is unfamiliar to younger listeners and we don’t want to alienate them. “The church is only one generation away from being extinct” we hear again and again. You’ve got to speak the language that young people understand if you want them to come to church. While I agree the church needs to make meaningful connections with people of each generation, I don’t think we have to be limited to the language and images found in the rest of society. I think, in fact, that there is something good to be said for using unique words when we speak about faith, and in our faith tradition discipleship is a word that refers specifically to the relationship between Jesus and those who follow him.

The word “disciple” appears in the Bible almost exclusively in the Gospels. There are two Greek words for disciple in the New Testament, and they are used

interchangeably. In one meaning, discipleship tells of a relationship between teacher and student. A disciple is a learner, a pupil. This definition of discipleship is the subject of the Gospel text this morning, where Jesus denounces false teachers who do not practice what they teach. It’s not the *teaching* Jesus quarrels with, but the teachers themselves.

In the other meaning, discipleship is about companionship, in the sense of “going along together.” A disciple is a follower, one who literally moves with someone in a certain direction, walking behind them, being led by them. When Jesus calls his disciples he bids them to follow him, to be his companions on the way.

In either case, the key factor is not the teaching itself or the direction one might take, but the person who teaches, the one who leads. That’s why Jesus has such a problem with the Pharisees and scribes who do not practice what they preach.

As Christians our faith is not merely adhering to a collection of ethical teachings, or setting one’s life in a certain direction. It is essentially about the teacher, about the leader – about Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote The Cost of Discipleship, said that Christianity is not a religion at all, but a *relationship*. What we do and who we are as Christians is inseparable from the person of Jesus.

This morning we confirm eight youth who have been learning and growing in their faith. They have written and shared statements of faith with session. They are awesome statements about what it means to be a disciple and what it means to believe in Jesus Christ. Kim and I had great conversations with the students in this year’s confirmation class. As a pastor, I found it enlightening to speak with our young people about matters of faith because of their openness and their willingness to ask questions, and to push a bit. There were times when class felt like “everything you ever wanted to ask a pastor and weren’t afraid to ask!” We who are so comfortable and settled in our faith would do well to spend an evening or two with our confirmation class to get a refresher course on the liveliness of Christian faith.

Not this year, but in years past, I remember one particular confirmation student who told me she was doing fine with God, she was even alright with the Holy Spirit, but she was struggling with the “Jesus thing.” I encouraged her in her questioning by saying that Christian faith is, in the end, *about Jesus*; there’s no way of getting around that. If we are to count ourselves Christian,

we will need to come to terms with Jesus. It is good for us all to remember that “a disciple is by definition one *who has not yet arrived*, we are learners trying to comprehend strange words and unravel puzzling experiences.” That confirmation student was precisely where you and I ought

which we disagree. One of my favorite professors told a class once “that the older I get the less apologetic I am about my affection for Jesus. I want to reclaim him. He is my teacher, my leader. I long to be his disciple.” That made an impression on me.

The psalmist this morning points us in the way of discipleship, by creating for us the image of people wandering in the wilderness, without hope, lost and confused, moving aimlessly through life. The psalm says,

*Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to an inhabited town;
hungry and thirsty, their soul
fainted within them.*

That for me offers a stark picture of so many of us. We are people thirsting for direction in life, hungering for meaning, aching for something more than the fleeting satisfaction of the things of this world, yearning for relationships that matter.

It is when the spiritually desert-bound seek after God that their lives take on meaning and find direction. They begin to follow God and to find their way to a place of safety and nourishment.

*They cried to the Lord in their trouble,
And God delivered them from their distress;
God led them by a straight way,
Until they reached an inhabited town.*
(Psalm 107:4-7)

Discipleship begins by knowing our need for God. Often we are so busy with solving

the problems of the world or untangling ourselves from our schedules or slogging through the minutiae of daily living that we lose sight of ourselves in the process. In the words of the psalmist, we “find no way to an inhabited town.”

The first step in Christian discipleship is to know that we are people in need of God. For Christians, that need expresses itself in a craving for the companionship of this one called Jesus. Listen to the words of Tommy Dorsey’s jazz hymn:

(Monica Sing) *Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, help me stand; I am tired, I am weak, I am worn; Through the storm, through the night, Lead me on to the light; Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*

The church is the company of saints who are not perfect, but rather, persevering, in their pursuit of God. In our Reformed perspective, saints are disciples, disciples are saints, not by virtue of any quality other than their willingness to rise up and follow Jesus, to join believers who throughout history have made it their business to seek God. Discipleship is foundational to our faith. As Christians we belong to “the disciple community.” We do not follow Jesus as isolated individuals, trying to find our way alone. We go as partners in responding to the call of this one who bids us come.

The “inhabited town” of which the psalmist speaks is that place to where God leads us. We Presbyterians call it “the communion of saints”. More than the arrival at a

destination it is a journey of discipleship. Today we celebrate and welcome more companions to this community of discipleship. We welcome them knowing that good questions help define us and change us. You and I are part of the disciple community, we are a band of those who do their level best, we journey together clinging to Jesus, taking his hand and seeking to follow. May God hear us, and help us. Amen.