

“The Perils of Discipleship”

Matthew 10: 24-39

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost/A, June 22, 2008

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This is an amazing day. Not only are we privileged to commission more than 70 people for work in the mission field, but we honor our high school graduates as well. It is a day to proclaim, “well done, good and faithful servant!” Somehow, the gospel lesson for this morning doesn’t conform with all our hoopla. It appears to send quite a contrary message, or does it? We would do well to consider more deeply and closely this passage from Matthew’s gospel. It speaks a difficult yet truthful message not only for our young people, but for all of us that call ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ.

Last week Jesus named the first 12 disciples. What brave souls they were to step forward to be the first ones to journey with Jesus. They received a commissioning to go into the world to cure the sick and cast out demons, to spread the good news of God’s love and to welcome the stranger. Today, Jesus continues in his instruction to those first disciples. He tells them that their life from this point forward, if they are faithful, will not be easy. Many people will be hostile to their message. Many people will be inhospitable and will want nothing to do with them. They might even be persecuted and suffer harm. Some of them may even die in their faithful service to Jesus. Jesus warns them that their family members may treat them differently and division may develop among those whom until now have loved and trusted them. This new community of disciples will become their family. Look around you, Jesus tells them, these are the ones upon whom you will now place your trust.

It is not recorded in the gospel account, but I can imagine Jesus turning to his disciples and asking, “okay, do you still want to be my disciple?” The decision to follow Jesus, then and now, is always a personal choice. We can choose to live out this calling faithfully or deny it. We can struggle to be faithful or act nonchalantly about our discipleship. We can go first to God in prayer when we need to make difficult decisions or we can listen to the advice of others. What Jesus invites his disciples to do will involve a commitment like none of them has ever made before. They will now speak a gospel truth instead of a truth the community thinks it wants to hear. Being a disciple will be difficult and frightening, trying and blessed all at the same time. The preacher William Willimon once said, “if only God’s grace weren’t so scary, if only it didn’t come with so much risk! Extending the circle to another involves the risk of rejection, the risk of laughter...of tears...of love.” Jesus holds nothing back. He wants them to know there are both joys and costs to our discipleship.

Whether you were one of the original twelve or a contemporary disciple, discipleship takes great courage. Jesus never said it would be easy. On the contrary, he told us it would be quite difficult from the very beginning. Most modern, first world Christians have little appreciation for how difficult discipleship can be. However, even today, discipleship is dangerous for many Christians. Not because someone may alienate family

or friends with their behavior, but because it may cost them their lives. There are people throughout the world who understand what Jesus meant when he said “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” Today there are still martyrs to the faith in Latin America and Africa and China and in some places in the United States.

Even if martyrdom is not in your future, it does not mean that discipleship is not without risk. Anything worth doing will involve some level of risk. The great 20th century preacher G.K Chesterton once said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, but found difficult and not tried.” I imagine many of us can resonate with that statement. Wherever we turn, someone is trying to make our life less difficult. Why then would we willingly choose something that promises to do just the opposite? We try to acquire stuff that makes our lives easier and instead find ourselves drowning in our own “simplicity.” Jesus did not come to simplify our lives.

In order to be faithful disciples, therefore, we must have great courage. We must strive to create communities where we encourage one another to do God’s will and to be faithful to even the most difficult teachings of Jesus. The word encourage comes from the Latin *to put your heart in*. In all that we do in the name of Jesus Christ, we are to strive to put our hearts into it. Whenever we do this, only wonderful things will happen. We strive to create communities where everyone’s heart is in the work.

It is important to remember that Matthew wrote this gospel many years after Jesus’ death. He understood all too well how difficult it was to live faithfully in a world that was openly hostile to your existence. Jesus encourages us to take heart, “what I say to you in the dark, tell in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.” Be not afraid. Have courage, put your heart and trust into it and you will be able to do whatever I have done and so much more!

Maya Angelou has said, “one isn’t necessarily born with courage, but one is born with potential. Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can’t be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest.” Courage may therefore be the greatest gift God has given us. We are quick to forget this when life gets too challenging. We don’t have to ask for courage, we have already received it. This is why Jesus tells his disciples, “be not afraid.” Be strong, be brave, be fearless. You can do these things because the Spirit is alive and at work in you. He says, “they can kill the body but they can not kill the soul.”

This is Jesus’ pre-game pep talk. Missioners, consider this your pre-trip pep talk too. Jesus knows how difficult it will be to live a life that is so contrary to the dominant culture. The early church was decidedly a counter-cultural movement. For the most part, it does not feel that way any longer. For many Christians today, following Jesus still goes against the values and expectations of the dominant culture. One still needs to make a choice to be a Christian. Christ and culture are no longer inexorably linked. One chooses to be here on Sunday morning instead of remaining home with the family. One chooses to give up a portion of one’s well-earned vacation time to accompany high school students on a mission trip. One chooses to devote significant hours to the work of

the church instead of being on the ball field with one's child or working additional hours at one's job or travelling in one's retirement.

Jesus tells his disciples our choices are not made without risk. For some people, being active in your church will mean alienation from your family. For other people, devoting so much time to your church and its ministries will make you less popular with your peers. You may lose a friend or two that can not understand why your church is so important to you. Others may not understand why you refuse to do the things the rest of the kids are doing, why you would rather walk away from a friendship than compromise your own integrity to do something you know is not consistent with your faith. Jesus is confident that when we take our discipleship seriously we will come to know that the joys of discipleship outweigh the costs.

Billy Graham once said, "courage is contagious." I know this to be true. You can see it on the faces of these young people who are just chomping at the bit to get into the mission field. They can't wait to get on those vans and into that bus to begin the work to which God has called them for this week. It is not only about the work we will do this week or the people we will serve. We know it is about the kind of life Jesus calls us to live. The way we are called to receive everyone as a child of God. The way we look at God's creation and make decisions about how we can better care for it. The way we understand that there is no risk too great that would ever keep us from God's work. I believe this is why we have more and more young people seeking to be in mission each year. This is why college students put together their own mission week in Hartford because they felt something was missing. There is something life affirming about the work we do. There is something contagious about being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Go out into the world and be fearless. Go out into the world filled with compassion. Go out into the world trusting that you have been called and blessed and equipped to do the will of God. Go out into the world, all of you, believing with your very lives that nothing is ever impossible with God. That is what disciples do. That is what we have always done. May it be so. Amen