

6/22/08
Year A

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Mt 10: 29-40
FCC - Asheville

Discipleship 101

So if I can be really honest here, had this not been the lectionary text for this morning, it probably would not have been my first choice. I suppose I was expecting – or maybe hoping - for one of the more uplifting stories – say the prodigal son or a parable where Jesus heals or feeds a multitude. Everyone likes those. But instead, we read, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Not quite the passage one might choose for a candidating Sunday.

Now at first, it may be tempting to disregard Jesus’ words and write it off to a poor translation or chalk it up to Christ having a bad day. I’m sure in his lifetime Jesus did have a bad mood or two. He was fully human, after all. Yet this text comes to us not from a place of exhaustion or a frustrated frame of mind, but rather from a place of truth and love. What we have here is Jesus preparing his followers, frankly, for what it will mean to live and love as God’s people.

One might call this an orientation to discipleship – a following Jesus 101 course. Lesson #1: Jesus teaches – “A disciple is not above the teacher. Therefore, if they have called the teacher of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!” In other words Jesus, the professor, explains: “If I am called a rebel rouser, evil, or arrested for civil disobedience – you can expect the same for we share the same gospel message of love, peace, and justice.”

Lesson #2: “What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.” In other words, the world can not be healed simply by osmosis. Be examples, Jesus encourages. Don’t just preach love and forgiveness – Be it – Show it! Or as Gandhi puts it, “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

And Lesson #3: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.” Who knew we could blame Jesus for the dysfunction in our families? The teacher is actually saying, “Don’t be fooled. Not everyone will accept my teachings or the ways they require transformation.”

Jesus knew all too well the reaction his disciples would encounter. He recognized some would be run out of their hometowns like he was. They would be called trouble makers, law breakers and attention seekers – like he was. Some would even be blamed for the deterioration of society – just like he was. You see, Jesus didn’t want anyone signing up for the course without first reading and understanding the syllabus.

Dorothy Day is recorded to have said, “Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.” Isn’t that the truth? Love is hard and it requires work. Yet the love we most often see depicted on the silver screen is a romanticized notion of the love you and I experience everyday. Hollywood love – the type where series problems can be fixed in the matter of two hours is simply a dream compared to

the love Jesus calls us to: an unconditional love that requires forgiveness much more than chocolate. Although chocolate doesn't hurt.

Love is what calls us from being victims to storytellers, from closets to pulpits, from death to life. Yet all too often, the Hollywood notion of love gets conflated with the Holy kind – reducing our faith to living our lives “not rocking the boat” or “just being nice everyone.”

But John Paul II reminds us that there is “no peace [or love] without justice.”

I am sure there were family members of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the pioneer for women's rights, who wished she'd stop making a spectacle of herself. And there were those close to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bishop Oscar Romero who severed all ties when they refused keep quiet.

“I will cause division,” Jesus prepares.

Before I started Divinity School, my friends begged me not to change. “Don't become a Jesus freak,” they'd joke, but only half kidding. “Don't go all ‘Godly’ on us and stop being any fun,” they'd say. And honestly, I tried not to change. I tried to keep what I was learning from influencing my behavior. I didn't want my friends or family to think I wasn't the same person.

Thankfully though, I was challenged in my understanding of discipleship. The point is to grow, I realized, to change. Faith is about more than what we believe – the joyful piece is found when put those beliefs into practice. Following Jesus will change us by opening our eyes to see both the beauty and brokenness in this miraculous world and inviting us to participate in both.

Friday night at the ONA potluck, I was privileged to meet many people – including two young ones names Asa & Ellie, grandkids of Elizabeth and Catherine. Before Asa & Ellie were about to leave, Ellie decided she wanted to take a bite of the dessert her grandmother Catherine was enjoying. She didn't need to beg long before the softhearted granny gave in. After taking a bite, Catherine asked how she liked it. Ellie responded, “It was good, but yucky.”

Those of us standing around, enjoying our second and third helping of this dessert all chuckled as we relished in Ellie's honest answer. And it occurred to me morning that there really isn't a better way to describe discipleship: It's good, but can sometimes also be a bit yucky.

Living as people of God is challenging stuff. Some loved ones may not get it – Why we see the despair in the heart of the homeless man resting in a neighboring park and feel called to do something about it. Why we are no longer numb to the fear in the eyes of the illegal immigrant who is denied acceptance. Why the hopelessness in the story of a jail inmate addicted to meth. now becomes an invitation into a supportive relationship. It's discipleship and it's not easy. But the good news is – we don't do alone.

Here in this same challenging text, our teacher reassures us. “Do not be afraid! Do not fear! For our loving Creator is with us and knows us intimately.” Do not fear for the Holy One created and named each of us valuable – a significant and needed part of the Kingdom of Heaven – a beautiful child of God.

We have been created to live in freedom and love abundantly. The life we've been given is waiting for us to re-claim. Lose this life centered in power and find the one

rooted in service, Jesus teaches. Lose this identity grounded in consumerism and find the one embedded in community.

Do you hear it? Do you hear our Teacher calling the roll? Class is beginning. It's the most challenging course former students warn, but one that promises a life of abundance, and hope, continual transformation, and everlasting wholeness. Come and let us be good and yucky together. The class is discipleship 101 – how to live a life centered in God's love: a truth-telling, justice-seeking, world healing love.

Thanks be to God!