

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Discipleship in Jesus

How do Christians become disciples in Jesus Christ? It is a question nearly 2 millennia old. In our first reading from Isaiah 42:1, we find prophetic words...

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight, I will put my Spirit upon him and he will bring justice to the nations....” Isaiah was a prophet whose words hark back nearly 800 years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Isaiah’s message is rich in symbolism and frankly clear...“await the coming of the Lord.” “I will not give my glory to another...see, the former things have taken place, before they spring into being.” And later, in 52:13, Isaiah follows the announcement of the coming of the Lord, describing his ministry, his life, and the death of His Suffering Servant..., moving, prophetic words delivered 800 years before our Lord was born. Isaiah does not announce the coming of another prophet, a suffering servant, but rather the coming of the one who is the Lord, the Son of God. The Old Testament writings of Isaiah create great anticipation, not for he who announces, but rather for He who is Lord. These words create a foundation for one of the key elements of discipleship, an element that needs a little more detailing.

A common definition of “discipleship” is that of a person who is a pupil or an adherent of the doctrines of another; a follower: as, a disciple of Freud; or (and here is the important distinction) in the case

of religion, a disciple is defined as a person who is a pupil, an adherent, a follower of Christ, the one to be worshipped. The first element to incorporate into discipleship in Jesus is this concept; Christ is not only a leader, but to be worshipped. History notes the lives of many leaders who had “disciples”, not only Freud, but from a religious perspective: Moses, King David, Buddha, and Muhammad. Each of these was a great leader, revered by their disciples, but none were similar to Jesus in the most fundamental way. To the disciples of Christ, Jesus is the most revered leader, but more so the Leader to be worshipped, worshipped as our Lord. Jesus is absolutely unique in this regard. As Jesus of Nazareth or Jesus the Risen Christ, we Christians find a core element of our being recognizes that to be a disciple in Jesus is not just to follow, but to understand viscerally that Jesus is Lord and respond to Him in worship. Jesus is revealed to us through his life, teachings, ministry, death and resurrection as the Son of God, Son of Man.

John-the-Baptist (Matt 3:1-13) reaches back to Isaiah to announce the kingdom of heaven has come near. “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: prepare a way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” In his devotion to God and the coming of the Lord, John-the-Baptist makes clear to the crowds that John is a prophet and baptizes with water in anticipation of the Lord; whereas “He [the Lord] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Jesus is the

Anointed One, deserving of our devotion and worship. The Lord was sent by God as mediator and as a means of self-revelation of a fully transcendent God to His earthly creatures.

But how do we earthly creatures encounter Jesus as our portal to our transcendent God, the Almighty, the Creator? Here in the 21st Century, as in the 1st century, we offer our deepest worship to the God Almighty through his Son, Jesus Christ. So for discipleship in Jesus, the first pillar is devout worship.

Our second reading, from the New Testament Gospel of Matthew (26:57-75), about the Passion of Christ may seem a little misplaced in late August. We are accustomed to discuss the Passion narratives as we mark the solemn darkness of Good Friday and then celebrate the joy of Easter morning. The content of the Passion is great. For our discussion of discipleship in Jesus, let us confine ourselves to the 24 hours in which we glimpse both the scene as well as the reactions of the early disciples that commences with the trial of Jesus by the Sanhedrin. There is much for us to learn and to understand about discipleship in this reading.

The scene in which the Sanhedrin tries Jesus represents the collision of two diametrically opposed worlds: the kingdom of the establishment in 1st century Palestine versus the unfolding of the Kingdom of Heaven, prophesized by Isaiah, by John-the-Baptist, and revealed by Jesus. But as Christians, we know from the Scriptures that the teachings of Jesus were not of a heaven on earth where there was no pain, no toil, no disease, but only bucolic bliss. Quite to the contrary, the message of Jesus is quite clear: the exalted were to be humbled, and the humbled to be exalted; enemies were not to be slain, but to be forgiven and loved; the poor, the

meek, the destitute were to inherit the earth, not the rich, the proud, and the movers. The response to this message that threatened the status quo with a world literally “upside down” was predictably harsh, vicious, and finally lethal. This was the scene into which the disciples were thrust as they followed Jesus. In many ways, we 21st century followers of Jesus are confronted with a challenging world, one filled with much of the same sin. So let’s compare discipleship in Jesus for the earliest disciples and find our way to 21st century discipleship.

Simon, renamed Peter by Jesus, was a Galilean fisherman, who according to the Gospel of Mark (3:16) was the first disciple chosen by Jesus. He had the most intimate knowledge of the life of ministry of Jesus, being present at the Transfiguration of Jesus and assigned a leadership role for the 12 apostles. Peter was dearly beloved by Jesus. Jesus asks the disciples “who do people say I am?” [Mark 8:27-29], and further queries Peter separately, and Peter answers “You are the Christ”. Jesus foretells the disciples that they will all fall away, for it is written in Zechariah (13:7) “I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” Even more astonishing in our second reading from the NT, Jesus foretells Peter that he will disavow knowledge of Jesus three times before the rooster crows.

We Christians are often conflicted in our feelings about the disciples in the Passion of Christ. These followers who spent months with Jesus, watched first-hand his ministry unfold, witnessed the feedings of the masses, witnessed the healing of the blind and sick, witnessed the resurrection of the dead, and for Peter witnessed the Transfiguration of Jesus. Yet, in the midst of the confusion, the sense of loss, the sense of disappointment in Jesus and what they view as his inability to call upon the forces of God to change the course of his

crucifixion, the first disciples scatter and question their faith. Frankly we find it astonishing. But in our exploration of discipleship in Jesus, we must ask ourselves, "Are we any different than Peter? Would we have behaved somehow differently if we were back in 1st century Palestine? How do we behave today in the 21st century when our faith in Jesus seems tested?"

In New Testament class, we were asked a simple, but profound and provocative question: Would you have gone to the cross with Jesus? Would you, or I, or any one of us, or all of us, gone to the cross with Jesus? Only in the quiet time, in that stillness and silence of deep faith, can we begin to understand the dimensions of this critical question. This question is really aimed at the more critical query: as disciples of Jesus, what kind of disciples are we? And what kind of disciples in Jesus do we seek to become? Like Peter, we suffer from two major shortcomings (only two) that impact our developing discipleship in Jesus: #1, is a resistance to God's plan for us; and #2, is our faithful disbelief that underlies uncertainty.

#1. How does resistance to God affect our discipleship in Jesus? As Bruce Miller highlighted in his sermon earlier this month, we are faced with issues of wishes versus values. Our plan for ourselves and God's plan for us often collide, for a very good reason: the transcendent nature of God limits the accessibility of his earthly creatures to His will. Not so, however, for us when we invest ourselves in discipleship in Jesus. When confronted with adversity in others, are we overcome with anger, seeking retribution, feeling slighted? Jesus says "First, love God your Creator more than anything else. Then, love all other people the same as you love yourself." This message is so incredibly simple, but yet so hard for us. Repeatedly the apostles lose their resolve, as we do. When left to our

own devices, do we seek the lesser place in life's many venues? Or rather do we consider first our own hard-work and accomplishments to "justify" and self-assign ourselves to the higher place? The apostles grappled with the notion of who among them was the best, much to the displeasure of Jesus. The greatest among them must work to become the least; the master must become the lowest servant. Are we not like the disciples, sometimes stumbling through the challenges of life taking the wrong route when in our hearts discipleship in Jesus has shown us the way?

If you wish to find an adjective that best expresses how the earthly creatures were viewed by their Creator, "stiff-necked" comes through loud and clear throughout the Old and New Testaments. God chose to create us earthly beings to be with Him and share eternity. God sent His only beloved Son as the once-and-for-all and for all-time mediator of self-revelation to His earthy creatures. The precious blood of His Son was shed to atone for our fallen lives. Hatred and rejection are overcome through Jesus Christ. Jesus looks through our self-worthlessness. The grace of God reveals the sin of the world to us. Often it is only until this grace is revealed to us that we come to know both how loved we are and how sinful we can be. As noted theologian Karl Barth observed: "God chose not to spend all eternity without us." Discipleship in Jesus overcomes our resistance, overcomes our sin, and reveals to us how loved we are in Jesus.

#2. Our second shortcoming is our "faithful disbelief" as uncertainty in the will of God for us and the mediation of God through Jesus Christ. Much like Peter, often we challenge our faith and our belief in God through Jesus Christ. Faithful

disbelief seems an oxymoron, but rather it best exemplifies what goes on in our minds when life challenges us. Last week Julie Lutz provided to us a moving sermon in which I sensed her faithful disbelief and uncertainty. I sensed it in her words and I have sensed it in my own life countless times. Death, loss, separation, divorce, sickness, economic pressures, broken dreams all can stimulate us faithful disbelief in God. A moving example comes from Jeremiah (31:14-16).. "A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more." Rachel challenges God directly and refuses to be comforted, she will not be consoled, for her children are no more.

We are "faithful disbelievers". We believe in God and His saving grace through Jesus Christ. We disbelieve when God's plan collides with our plan. We can look at the loss of a parent, or of a spouse, or of a friend, or of a child, challenging any explanation as to how can this be God's plan for us? But friends, we forget the countless blessings provided to us, the grace of God, the blessings of our families, friends, of our life today at this very moment. Seldom do we tally the infinite number of ways that our lives are blessed, until confronted with a major challenge. Yes, we are faithful disbelievers, because in so challenging our faith, we make it stronger. Much like returning to health from sickness gives us a fresh perspective on our blessings (often short-lived), actually we grow stronger in our faith through faithful disbelief. Jesus loved Peter, in spite of his resistance; Jesus loved Peter, in spite of his faithful disbelief which ultimately was manifest as the early Christian church. Friends, in this very same way, 20 centuries later, we can feel the love of Jesus, we can approach our wholly transcendent God through Jesus, if only we

become more firmly-footed disciples in Jesus.

Finally, our discussion raises two interconnected questions as we seek to deepen our discipleship in Jesus. #1. Can we lessen our resistance to the will of God, and how? #2. Can we lessen our faithful belief in God, and how? For query #1 the answer is "yes", we can reduce our resistance to God. How? Answer, through deepening our discipleship in Jesus. As we traverse in our lives the boundaries of birth versus death, love versus abandonment, understanding versus hatred, compassion versus disinterest let us look to Jesus as a Savior and our Compass. As disciples in Jesus, we not only follow Jesus, we worship Jesus and the transcendent Almighty who he mediates in our lives; Jesus not only points to the light, Jesus is the Light; Jesus not only points to the New Way, Jesus is the New Way; Jesus not only gives of the Word, Jesus is the Word, [John 1:14] "An the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth"

Query #2 asks, "Can we lose our faithful disbelief in God?" Well, the answer is both "Yes" and "No". Yes, as Christians we encounter God through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We are agents of God, placed in this world for a purposeful Christian life. If we were fully able to embrace discipleship in Jesus, our faithful disbelief would be unnecessary. No, because through our God-given nature we are stiff-necked and faithful disbelievers. Rachel, Peter, Bruce, Julie, you, me, all of us...are faithful disbelievers. Our disbelief is enabled by our faith in God and His boundless grace. Our disbelief is enabled by our faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who loves us and invites us to strengthen our faith in God. Let us pray.