

### “Discipleship: Following Jesus”

***Prologue:** Today’s gospel lesson from Luke consists of two units, each having its own integrity, however, they belong together because verses 51-56 set the tone for the encounter with Jesus in verses 57-62. The unswerving intensity ... the destiny-oriented sense of Jesus’ move toward Jerusalem ... is essential for us, the listener, to grasp the uncompromising demands that Jesus places on would-be followers. This is the same sequence we hear from other passages when Jesus foretells of his own suffering and death and then calls his disciples to a life of daily cross bearing. What comes across in today’s gospel lesson is that discipleship is not easy. Jesus is honest. The conflict, in discipleship, is not between choosing a self-evident good over a self-evident evil. The conflicts are real because they are conflicts between one set of goods and another. Jesus never makes the path of discipleship sound easier or less costly than it really is. Unfortunately, today’s modern church has become deaf to this lesson.[read Luke 9:51-62]*

***Message:** The direct way from Galilee to Jerusalem led through Samaria, but most Jews avoided it. There was a centuries’ old quarrel between the Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans in fact did everything they could to hinder and even to injure any bands of pilgrims who attempted to pass through their territory. For Jesus to take this path to Jerusalem was unusual; and to attempt to find hospitality in a Samaritan village was even more unusual. When Jesus did this he was extending a hand of friendship to a people who were enemies. Unfortunately, Jesus’ offer of friendship was spurned and hospitality refused. This is why James and John go ballistic and ask for permission to call on divine aid to “nuke” the village! But Jesus would not permit them.*

There is no other New Testament passage in which Jesus so directly teaches the duty of tolerance as in this one, a lesson for modern day that needs to be learned; because in many ways tolerance is a lost virtue and often, where it does exist, its exists for the wrong reason. Of all the great religious leaders during the Reformation period, none practice a pattern of tolerance better than did John Wesley, the father of the Methodist Church.

He said, *I have no more right to object to a man for holding a different opinion from mine than I have to differ with a man because he wears a wig and I wear my own hair; but if he takes his wig off and shakes the power in my face, I shall consider it my duty to get quit of him as soon as possible. ... The thing which I resolved to use every possible method of preventing was a narrowness of spirit, a party zeal, ... that miserable bigotry which makes many so unready to believe that there is any work of God but among themselves. ... We think and let think.* When Wesley’s nephew, Samuel, the son of his brother Charles, entered the Roman Catholic Church, he wrote to him, “Whether in this Church or that, I care not. You may be saved in either or damned in either; but I fear you are not born again.”

I think the saddest and most gut wrenching thing about many Christians and churches is that they hold the conviction that their beliefs or methods or traditions alone are correct. The lack of tolerance has been and continues to be the cause of more distress in Christ’s Church than almost any other thing. I am reminded of this saying: “Remember that whatever your hand finds to do, someone thinks differently!” God has His own “secret stairway” into every heart. God fulfills Himself in many ways, and no person or church has a monopoly on God’s truth!! However, and this is very important, our tolerance must be based not on indifference but on love. We ought to be tolerant not because we could not care less; but because we look at the other person with eyes of love.

When Abraham Lincoln was criticized for being too courteous to his enemies and reminded that it was his duty to destroy them, he gave this great answer, “Do not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?” Even if a person be utterly mistaken, we must never regard him or her as an enemy to be destroyed but as a strayed friend to be restored by love. After all, Jesus’ purpose on earth, as is the purpose of his disciples, is to bring others to Christ through love and grace, not through judgment.

This is the tone with which we must approach the second half of our lesson. As believers and followers of Christ, we have a high calling for and duty of tolerance. Therefore, there is the necessity of “counting the cost” before one chooses to be a disciple ... before one begins the journey of faith. And for our enlightenment, we have three people who encounter Jesus along the way to Jerusalem. They remain unidentified and the conflicts that concern them go unresolved. This is a favorite device of scripture, one that forces the reader to identify with the characters and ask, “What would I do if I were one of them?” Since Luke does not tell us what happens next in any of the three cases, we are left to imagine what would happen if we were one of these three people who encountered Jesus.

All three encounters bring out the rigors of discipleship and the uncompromising commitment that it entails. This flies in the face of approaches by churches that attempt to market themselves, as well as the infamous “altar call” approach. Imagine a modern day evangelist pleading with potential converts to consider the matter more fully, discouraging them from taking a step they may not be prepared to take. In Bonhoeffer’s classic, *“The Cost of Discipleship,”* he rails against grace that is “cheap.” Cheap grace ignores the fact that what God freely offers is life under God’s rule. The gift of God is an invitation to discipleship, an invitation that we never deserve and ought be surprised yet overjoyed to receive. Yet the very substance of this gift makes a claim upon our lives, a claim that is absolute.

Let us look at these three followers. To the first person, Jesus’ advice was, “Before you follow me, count the cost.” No one can ever say that they were induced by Jesus under false pretense. Jesus paid people the compliment by pitching his demands so high that they cannot be higher. Jesus’ words to the second person sound harsh, but they need not be so. In all probability the man’s father was not dead, or even nearly dead. The point Jesus was making is that in everything there is a crucial moment ... if that moment is missed the thing most likely will never be done at all. Every time we have a fine feeling and do not act on it, the less likely we are to act on it at all. The emotion becomes a substitute for the action. Take one example: sometimes we feel that we would like to write a letter, perhaps a sympathy note, perhaps a thank you, perhaps a congratulations. If we put it off until tomorrow, it will in all likelihood never be written. Jesus urges us to act at once when our hearts are stirred.

Jesus’ words to the third person state a truth. No farmer ever plowed a straight furrow looking back over his shoulder. In other words, there are some whose hearts are in the past. They walk forever looking backwards and thinking wistfully of the good old days. To the third person Jesus did not say, “Follow!” He said, “I accept no lukewarm service.” And left the man to make his own decision.

A grandfather tells a story about a time when he and his grandson were at the beach. They meet another old man who was very disgruntled about life, and to add to all his troubles, he had a slight touch of sunstroke. The little boy had been listening, but had not picked it up quite correctly; and when they left the grumbling complaints of the old man, the little boy said, “Granddad, I hope you never suffer from a sunset.” The Christian marches on, not to the sunset, but to the sunrise. The watchword is not, “Backwards!” but “Forwards!”

We are here this morning because, in one way or another, we are those who have said to Jesus, “I will follow you.” Sometimes we have been faithful, sometimes we have not. Perhaps the good news is ... at least we are following him. We are here being instructed by him, examining our lives, then perhaps correcting our lives in submission to His Word. Jesus knows discipleship is not easy. He warns us. Yet, despite the challenge, it is a journey worth taking.

Jesus gives to our lives a sense of adventure. We walk with him, sometimes well, sometimes poorly, but with him, beside him along the way toward God. Discipleship, indeed, is not easy. This is why during this hour we pray for strength to do the good we must do ... we ask for forgiveness when we fail ... we renew our determination to walk the way with Jesus and not look back. Each and every day, we must make a decision for faith by saying “Yes” to God’s call to follow him. The world would have us say “No!” But we must “solider on” determine to keep the faith ... to grow in faith ... and to reach our final destination: a glad and heavenly reunion with God. Amen.