

Costly Discipleship

Luke 17:5-10

2 Timothy 1:1-14

I believe it is no coincidence that on this World Communion Sunday, we are confronted by demanding scriptures such as these: words from Jesus that tell us we are worthless slaves, servants who can expect no rightful place at the table... or these words from Paul that exhort Timothy to join with him in suffering for the Gospel, relying on the power of the God who saves us and calls us to a holy calling - that is to guard the good treasure that is entrusted to us: the faith and love and courage and power that is ours in Christ Jesus. Paul calls us to a costly discipleship, a discipleship that is willing to trust completely in God and is willing to suffer for the One who suffered for us. Our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world perhaps know this discipleship better than we do... and could it be, my friends, that this costly discipleship is today more than ever what the world needs now?

Please pray with me: O Lord, You come to us through your word and by the Holy Spirit. We seek to follow you. Grant us open hearts and open lives, that we may learn what it means to be called Christian. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Where did you come from? Now, it would be interesting, if we had the time, to take a survey to see how you might answer... for each one of us will find our own particular context for that question. Some of you might say, I came from the breakfast table in my home in West Acres... or I came from Pine Lake, or I came from Waterford.

Some might say, I came from North Carolina, where I was born ... or, thinking more globally, some here might say I came from Cameroon, or Nigeria, or Australia, or Mexico, or Guatemala, or Germany, or England, or China.

Some of you—I suspect the younger among us—might say, "I came from my mother." And for those of you who do, you share in common an insight that comes to us from the Bantu peoples of Africa. There is a South African saying that goes like this: *Umuntu, ngamuntu, ngabantu* - which means, a person is a person because of other persons¹. No one is born alone, no one lives alone. We are all born into relationship, we all come from our ancestors, and they deeply influence who we are today.

In the scripture we just read, Paul acknowledges that Timothy, whom he calls his child in faith, in fact came to that faith as much through the witness of his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois. Timothy is a child of God and a disciple of Christ because of the witness of the evangelist Paul, yes, but more importantly because he came from his ancestors who taught him the faith...his mother and his grandmother, who were converted to Christianity from Judaism by Paul himself. And you are here today because somebody led you in the faith. You see, we none of us journey in faith alone - we follow our forebears who show us the way.

One of the exercises every candidate in ministry faces is to write their personal faith journey. Over and over and over and over again, for annual reviews, and professors and peer groups, I was called upon to think through what had formed me in my faith. As repetitive as the task came to feel, it was a gift to me, for it helped me realize that my faith did not come from out of the blue, but was handed to me through the faith of my mother and father, Barbara and Deric, and by the faith of my grandmother Mabel before them. For each one of you, someone planted and nurtured the faith in you—played a critical role of instruction and demonstrated qualities of discipleship that brought you to this place where we worship together today ... united on this World Communion Sunday with all around the world who call themselves Christians.

And so now, I wonder how you might reply... where did you come from? Where did your faith journey begin? Who mentored you along the way? Who planted and nurtured the faith that lives in you? Each one of us stands, in one way or another, on the shoulders of those who came before ... our mothers and fathers and grandmothers, our Sunday School teachers, our friends who brought us to church, our forebears in faith from Karl Barth to John Calvin to Augustine to Timothy to Paul. And each one of us, in that line of inheritance, is called to transmit the faith to the generations who come after us, for as we have all—like Timothy—been entrusted with the Good Treasure of the Gospel, so too each one of us has received the great commandment: Spread the Good News, Go therefore and make disciples... So... Come, on... let's go... let's go into the world and make disciples.

Hmm.... disciples... You know what? I'm not sure discipleship will be an easy sell in today's world. For we live in a feel-good society of instant gratification and hedonistic pleasure where to many denying oneself and taking up one's cross sounds more like going on a diet and buying some shiny jewelry than following the living Christ. The truth is, we live in a world that no longer can assume Christianity is the norm ... and while certainly it continues to grow, particularly in the southern hemisphere, we should be concerned about the transmission of faith here in the northern hemisphere, where the church is shrinking and books about atheism begin to make the best seller's list. According to an article by historian Paul Johnson in Forbes magazine recently, "militant atheism" is on the rise². Now, this is not a new phenomenon. It happened in the 1700s and the 1800s and the 1900s in response to events and discoveries that questioned the established views of humanity and the universe.

And now, Johnson posits, in a reaction against religious fundamentalism of all kinds, there is a movement underfoot to discredit any belief in God. Johnson finds this trend worrisome, and wonders: will the world survive a prolonged bout of atheism? What will happen if we have no faith to sustain us? What will become of the world without any formula through which to express our longings for peace and community? He quotes Karl Rahner, who said: "If ever God is banished from the world so that even his image is eradicated from the human mind, we will cease to be human and become merely very clever animals—and our ultimate fate will be too horrible to contemplate."

Johnson names religious faith as "an indispensable element to our peace of mind and such happiness as we are capable of enjoying on this earth." He says, "...it is in the interests of all people that those of us who enjoy religious faith should examine carefully what it has done, is doing and will do to sustain and comfort us in this harsh and difficult world. We should add up all its benefits and then proclaim the results to the world. There will be plenty who will listen."

Well... maybe... I agree with Johnson that there will be many who seek to find something greater than our own selves in which to believe. And I agree that we people of faith need to proclaim its truth to the world. But I think Johnson misses the same important point that many of us are tempted to overlook: Jesus Christ calls us to something more than a feeling of peace and happiness. Jesus calls us to be his disciples. In fact, 269 times the New Testament summons us to discipleship. And I think, ultimately, this is what Christianity has suffered from: we have tried so hard to make the gospel attainable and attractive, that we have diluted its demands. We have translated Christianity into some vague civic faith that tends to be a religion of good works and boils Christianity down to being a good person. The role of the church has been reduced to marry and bury, to offer programs and to please congregants, to make more members who come because Jesus is there to make us feel good, to comfort us, to pat us on the head and assure us we're OK. If in fact we offer such an innocuous and irrelevant savior, it's no wonder that atheism is on the rise.

But that is not the discipleship to which Jesus calls us. For discipleship means to be an apprentice, someone who learns from their teacher, someone who submits to the discipline the teacher provides, someone who aspires to be just like them. Our teacher is Jesus, the one who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. And Jesus calls us to follow him...to follow him all the way to the cross... to be not church-members, but disciples, people who are not ashamed of the Gospel, but rather who live empowered by its truth, which is the life-giving force the world so desperately needs now. Our faith in Christ is the greatest heritage we can transmit to the next generation, who desperately long—not for a spirit of shame and cowardice—but a spirit of power and of love, and of self-discipline.

I've been impressed this weekend by reading about the observance of Ramadan—the Muslim month of fasting that is currently underway. I read how Islam teaches the simple and powerful truth that discipline can teach endurance, shift values, and strengthen the soul. Perhaps this very emphasis on discipline is what is making Islam the world's fastest growing religion. Our western culture may seem to have bought into the pursuit of happiness at all costs, but ultimately what is most frightening is not costly discipleship, but the cost of non-discipleship—free-floating in a chaotic world without a center, without a heritage, with no greater savior than ourselves.

When we read Paul's encouragement to Timothy to join with him in suffering for Gospel, we face a pretty uncomfortable charge. But you know what? What the world needs now is not a comfortable, feel-good faith that affirms what we want to hear, but rather, what the world needs now is faith that offers something to believe in that is greater than ourselves, someone to follow who is greater than ourselves, someone who calls us—you and I—to be greater than ourselves. This is what the world needs now... a savior who demands something of us. A savior who longs to transform us into disciples, people who live and breathe the spirit of love and power and courage: followers of the Christ, servants of the Most High God.

Now if all of this sounds overwhelming to you—as it does to me—then I hope you can be reassured when we read the Gospel text that David shared with us. In the face of Jesus' teachings which seem difficult and demanding, the disciples cry out: Lord, Increase our faith! We need greater resources! But Jesus says something astonishing. Faith is not a quantifiable commodity. If you have just the teeniest tiniest bit of faith, amazing things can happen! With the smallest spark of faith, we can stand over and against our culture to offer a true alternative: life and that abundant. With just a jot of faith, we can be a living continuation of the faith that has been passed on to us. With just a speck of faith, we can bear a lasting heritage to those who come after us ... with the tiniest morsel of faith, we can be nourished at this table with our brothers and sisters in all the places around the world where following Jesus Christ is demanding, counter-cultural and revolutionary. With even a mustard seed of faith we can open ourselves to God's power to change the world. Now let's go, and make disciples!

¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Naming and the Act of Faith*, *Christian Century*, October 4, 1989, p. 875.

² Paul Johnson. *Militant Atheism and God*. *Forbes Magazine*. October 8, 2007, p.27.