

September 4, 2016



"DISCIPLE: Take Faith Seriously"

Fall Sanctuary Worship Sermon Series – No. 1
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Well—that was a pretty shocking reading from Luke's Gospel, don't you think?! Thanks, Linda Diane, for putting it out there, even though it's clearly one of those passages we'd love to skip right over.

I'd say Jesus was bending over backwards to get our attention with this one. You think this is easy, what I'm asking you to do? You think it's like being the top draft pick by the championship team? You think it's like liking me or being my Facebook friend?

Think again. As Leonard Sweet has put it: "to be a follower of Jesus is to share his life and his cross, to live not only as a disciple of his teaching, but as a continuing incarnation of his life, death, and resurrection. Each disciple of Jesus is a living work of art--an incarnational presence of the Creator of all life, an always-faithful but ever-changing pilgrim on [Christ's] Way."

Our worship theme for Sunday mornings through the Fall is DISCIPLE. All the way through to Thanksgiving Sunday in November, we'll be looking at being a disciple, becoming a disciple, all the ways we strive to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, from every angle—the personal, the social, the attitudinal, the behavioral, the aspirational...and hopefully, we'll each be discovering areas in ourselves where we can grow, where we need to grow, need to go deeper, need to commit more fearlessly.

I hope you're up for a great ride. I hope you're ready to ask again: What does it mean to live as his disciple? What does it mean for me to be a follower of the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life? What does it mean to be his student, his witness, his servant, his advocate, his follower, his apprentice, his spokesperson, his ambassador, and his friend? What equips us, as people of faith, to persevere in, to witness to, to maintain God's radical hope through Jesus Christ....in a time such as this?

The headlines won't let up—racial tension, war, terrorism, climate change, refugees, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, fires....God's people and God's creation are hurting, badly. This is mostly not new news. And it's precisely why God sent Jesus to "pitch his tent among us" as one translation puts it. And it's precisely why God created the church. The church—the community of faithful disciples who bear witness, who point to truth, who embody hope, who serve the least of the least, who persevere in prayer, who give generously, who are known by their love of one another and of all God's children, who defend the creation, who seek the paths of peace and justice.

Jesus' claim on our lives, for those of us who would fancy ourselves to be his disciples, his claim on our lives is astonishingly demanding and completely counter-cultural. Especially for us now, who live in a time when commitment is suspect, when worship is optional, when no one RSVPs. We like to hedge our bets, to wait and see if something better comes along.

A colleague recently told me about a new study of Jewish millennials. I share this to show that some of the dilemmas we face are not unique to Christianity. Some years ago, the key word to describe what this group was looking for in a faith community was "empowerment." A few years later, the key word had shifted to "engagement." And now, the most recent studies indicate that the key word to understanding what people are looking for is "options."

Call me old-fashioned, but this may be why I like today's shocking Scripture reading so much. It wakes us up. It throws us off balance. It's strong enough language to break through habits and cultural norms and accepted wishy-washyness and a kind of accepted "whatever!" attitude to even the most important things in life. For, as has been said: "Applied to Jesus, a disciple is someone who learns from him to live like him—someone who, because of God's awakening grace, conforms his or her words and ways to the words and ways of Jesus."

Jesus calls us by name, and looks us in the eye, and takes the measure of our heart and says: "Follow me." Your life is at stake. All life is at stake. The life of the planet is at stake. The lives of all my brothers and sisters are at stake. Follow me. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. Jesus makes a radical claim on our lives. He asks much of us. And his ask should change us from the inside out.

Towards the end of his life, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism expressed his fear "lest [we Methodists] should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power." It's the responsibility of every generation to make sure that the power has not gone out, that we hold fast to what we know and say and believe to be true. That we shape our words and our lives in the manner of the One who calls us, authentic faith laying claim on us and shaping every aspect of our lives.

This is the journey we'll be on together this Fall. It will at times be intensely personal, if we let the questions penetrate our careful armor. But at all times, it will also be a shared journey. This is precisely why God created the church. The church—the community of faithful disciples who bear witness, who point to truth, who embody hope, who serve the least of the least, who persevere in prayer, who give generously, who are known by their love of one another and of all God's children, who defend the creation, who seek the paths of peace and justice.

This morning we are privileged to share, all together, in the sacrament of Holy Communion, the sacrament in which the bread is broken and the cup is poured out that we might be made whole. Whole, not just in a personal way, but whole in relation to God and to one another.

Truly we believe that something happens when we eat of the one loaf. For as the great teacher of the church, Martin Luther, taught, having shared this meal together we actually become part of one another. We become "brethren," he said, "fellow heirs with our Lord Jesus Christ." By eating the same bread, Luther preached, we become one. We become part of one another. We become one bread, he said. Fellow heirs with Christ. Fellow travelers on the Way. Fellow seekers, fellow disciples. We have each other to hold us up, to cheer us on, to help us keep our feet on the path.

As we prepare our hearts to receive this holy meal in which we are united with Christ and with one another, I invite us each to ask ourselves, as prayerfully and as honestly as we are able: "Are we willing to answer the call and pay the price necessary to become a new generation of saints through which God can do extraordinary things in our time?"

"Are we willing to take faith seriously? Are we willing to answer the call and pay the price necessary to become a new generation of saints through which God can do extraordinary things in our time?"

Amen.

Notes:

Study findings relayed by Dr. Diane Schuster.

Leonard Sweet. *I Am A Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012.

Sherry Weddell. *Becoming a Parish of Intentional Disciples*. *Our Sunday Visitor*, January 23, 2015.

The DISCIPLE sermon series is drawn from the work of Martin Thielen in *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series*. Compiled by Jessica Miller Kelley. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.