

Sermon Pentecost 4 Year A, Proper 7; Gospel Matthew 10: 24-39

God, the Christ Jesus, Holy Spirit: Help us become your disciples, to learn what you are asking us to be. Amen.

In today's gospel Jesus is finishing his "Missionary Discourse," to his disciples, one of his five discourses in Matthew's gospel. He is trying to tell his disciples not only what their mission will be, but also warn them of the perils they will face. His message for them and for us today is a tough one, a little intimidating I think. But first let's define exactly what it means to be a disciple. And also to be an apostle. Disciple means "one who learns," in this case to learn what it means to follow the way of Jesus. Apostle means "one who is sent out," sent to deliver a message. So, discipleship is a journey that includes learning, and the apostle or messenger carries the message he has learned as a disciple. Here is a question for you, a "fun fact": Who was the first apostle of Jesus? In John's gospel it was the Samaritan woman at the well. You probably remember the story. The woman had come to fill her bucket with water from the well, and Jesus was there by himself, and he says to her: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman replies "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty." Jesus calls her to be an apostle when he sends her out, saying "Go, call your husband and come back." (John 4)

Interesting isn't it? That the Samaritan woman, part of a group of people despised by the Jews, and the one who had been married five times and was living with another man who was not her husband, was the first apostle of Jesus! The focus for us today as disciples and apostles is to try to understand what Jesus is trying to teach us—what we are to learn from it. Those disciples he was talking to are of course long gone, and we are his disciples today. Who are we to be, what are we to say, and how are we to communicate this to others? And what is the cost of this discipleship?

Jesus' words about discipleship in this reading today are difficult. Consider what he says: "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 one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." And in Luke's gospel it gets even tougher when Jesus tells the large crowd "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...so none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." (Luke 14) What does Jesus mean by that? Is he going too far here? Is he really saying that we must do these things in order to be his disciples? Is this the cost of discipleship? Pretty radical don't you think? But here it is, right in the middle of Matthew's and Luke's gospels. We can't really get around it. What can we learn from these words?

There have been numerous Christian saints and martyrs who have suffered and died as a result of answering that call to discipleship. One such person is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He left the safety of America early in World War II to return to his home Germany to continue his resistance to the Nazis. Formerly a pacifist, he became persuaded of the need for violence against the Nazi regime and joined a group whose primary mission was to assassinate Hitler. He was arrested for his involvement in helping Jews flee from Germany. While in prison he continued to teach with the help of guards who smuggled out his writing, until he was transferred to a concentration camp. When his role in the attempted assassination of Hitler was discovered he was sentenced to death, and was hanged in April of 1945, just one month before Germany surrendered. He wrote the book The Cost

of Discipleship about that struggle. More than 75 years after his death, his life and writings serve as a lesson and example to all of us who seek to understand a Christian's responsibility in the face of injustice, and as encouragement to serve no matter how great the cost. Martin Luther King Jr. in his non-violent work for justice to overcome the systemic racism of our own country paid the same price when he was murdered in Memphis. Nelson Mandela, who later became South Africa's first black president and Nobel Prize winner, was a Christian who spent 27 years in prison for opposing South Africa's racist apartheid system. There are so many others who have as Jesus says "taken up the cross and follow me," and paid the ultimate price for living out their faith. What do their lives tell us about discipleship? Of course following Jesus does not mean that we have to literally physically die for it. But what did Jesus mean to say to us with those strong words? How can we become disciples—by that I mean followers of his Way—in the modern world? In the end, what we want to know is not, what would this or that man—or this or that Church—have of us, but what Jesus the Christ himself wants of us. And if we answer this call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and changes in our lives will it demand?

I don't have an answer for that question. I think we each have to find our own answer, and to find it each of us must in our own way go to Jesus, spend time with him, get to know him, become intimate with him. Yes indeed the Christ Jesus calls us to follow him, but it is only in each of our relationships with him that we will find exactly what he is asking of us. And it is not as if "one size fits all." We are not all called to pay the price of discipleship that Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King did. It is only through our individual relationships with the Christ, with the sacred Presence in us and around us, that we will find where the journey will take us, where the road will lead. As disciples we are called to listen, to learn, to discern, and then to embark on whatever journey that might be.

But back to Jesus' words themselves, about setting family members against one another and about giving up all our possessions. I think this text is a

good example of the words of scripture not saying what at first glance they seem to be saying. He is not trying to split families apart. Remember the context here. The author of Matthew is addressing the faithful followers of his day who are trying to live into their Christian faith while facing conflict and discouragement and danger, including the threat to their physical well-being. By the time these words were written, around forty to fifty years after Jesus' death, the Temple had been destroyed and Jerusalem laid to waste by the Roman oppressors. Followers of Jesus faced immense struggles. Those cozy days of breaking bread with Jesus seem far distant when, in response to trying to spread the good news of the gospel, they have been rewarded with persecution. I think the message here is that Jesus' priorities are Kingdom values and that these surpass all other values, including social and family values. He is calling us to prioritize our lives the same way, even when they come into conflict with other values we may have. That doesn't mean we have to turn against our families. It does mean, I think, that our greatest allegiance and highest priority is to help build this Kingdom of God Jesus is always talking about. And remember that the foundation of that Kingdom is love. As disciples we are called to learn just how to do that, in our own often unique way.

My wife Cynthia is part of a group of lay Eucharistic ministers at St. Paul's Mobile whose ministry includes providing communion for some of the residents at Allen Memorial Health and Rehabilitation Home, located a mile or so from here on Washington Avenue. Two of them go on Thursday mornings, and about ten or twelve of the residents show up for the service. Most of the residents who attend are physically and cognitively challenged, some with severe dementia. Most are markedly limited in their ability to understand what is being said and is happening in the service, and some are physically challenged to the point that they can't take the communion wafers and the wine into their mouths by themselves. Some don't seem to even understand where they are or what's going on, and I often wonder what these folks are getting out of the service and of receiving communion. Who

knows, and who am I to say! Cynthia has told me that it is a mystery, but she is certain that *something* is happening with those folks. What is happening is that somehow, through the bread and the wine—the body and blood of Christ—these people are experiencing the real Presence of God. Just like we do every Sunday at this table behind me. Yes, those ministers continue to go to Allen Memorial, every Thursday. In their own way they are building that Kingdom Jesus calls us to build. They are disciples, and they are apostles, carrying the message—through the body and blood of Christ—into the world around them.