

I must be honest with you this morning. There are days when our scripture readings present us with words that cause clergy to cringe when, after reading, they have to say, “The gospel good news of our Lord.” Today is one of those days. Today, I truthfully say to you that I am finding the gospel of Jesus Christ **increasingly** countercultural in our present context. Following Jesus takes courage. Jesus addresses this in our gospel reading today as he talks about discipleship. It would be so easy to gloss over this reading and say Jesus really did not mean what he is saying here. It would be so easy to simply water down his words and sugar coat them. It would be so easy to use another reading, one that provides us with a sugar-coated Christianity; but that would also leave us with a sugar-coated cross. Quite frankly, eliminating what this passage is all about would mean eliminating an honest, lay it on the line call to discipleship. So, today we are going to wrestle with this gospel reading and tackle this call to discipleship, Jesus’ call for us to follow him.

Listen again to what Jesus is saying:

“I’ve come to start a fire on this earth – how I wish it were blazing right now! I’ve come to change everything, turn everything right side up – how I long for it to be finished! Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything nice? Not so. I’ve come to disrupt and confront! From now on, when you find five in a house, it will be –

Three against two, and two against three;
Father against son, and son against father;
Mother against daughter, and daughter against mother;
Mother-in-law against bride, and bride against mother-in-law.”

These words are challenging but, Jesus **never** shies away from challenge. Jesus’ words are strong, urgent words that **name** what is going on. He lays it on the line and his words are an honest call to **live a life** of discipleship.

The late Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, “The world has two ways of getting rid of Jesus. The first is by crucifying him; the second is by worshiping him **without** following him.” Discipleship means worshiping **AND** following. It means living a life that is complicated because it is totally countercultural, increasingly unpopular, and sometimes even divisive. You see, it is quite easy to worship Jesus on Sunday, but it is all together something else to follow Jesus out there in that world on Monday. Quite frankly, it is very easy to say you are a follower of Jesus and attend worship only occasionally. However, discipleship in community is a much more difficult and demanding proposition. Discipleship is about **following** Jesus, **living** by his teachings, working together in community, and living in the Spirit of Jesus’ very life. Discipleship is a summons to faith and a call to daily **live** that faith, whatever the context. This is not easy!

Rev. Michael Curry, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, puts it

this way. He writes:

Yes, membership in the church is easy, but discipleship in community and actually living a life of faith is another matter. Why? Because, what the world looks down on and considers wretched, Jesus calls blessed. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek and humble. Blessed are the merciful and the compassionate. Blessed are those who work, speak out and make for peace in this world. Blessed are you when you are persecuted just because you stood for love, just because you showed compassion, just because you speak out for justice, just because you live a life that strives for justice, just because you live a different way, just because you live a life that is counter to all that culture tries to sell you. Blessed are you.

Yes, membership in a church is easy but **living** a life of discipleship is hard, tough stuff. Yet, it **is** the way of working for justice, even when justice seems impossible. It **is** the way of love, even when we work to love those who are so difficult to love, even as we love our enemies and all those who are considered “other.” It **is** the way of forgiving, even when forgiveness seems unwarranted, or circumstances are harsh and cruel. It **is** the way of compassion and welcome for the least of those among us, for the widow, the orphan, the resident alien, the immigrants and refugees, and **all** who are in need. It **is** the way of real, meaningful life, **life that truly matters**. And, such a way of life requires faith, active, living faith, the kind of faith that **perseveres** even in and through struggle. This is the kind of faith described in our reading from Hebrews today, the kind of faith lived by Rahab, Gideon, David and Samuel.

There is a story about English politician and philanthropist, William Wilberforce, who worked tirelessly to abolish slavery. It was Wilberforce who introduced legislation in the British Parliament to end the slave trade. In 1779 when he first introduced the bill, he was shouted down and laughed at. He was ridiculed and ostracized from polite society. But he continued. He continued year after year from 1779 until 1807 when the tide of public opinion had in fact changed. And he continued after that to argue and fight for an end to slavery itself – not just the slave trade, but the end of all slavery, something that finally happened in the British Empire in 1833, just a few days before Wilberforce died. At one point, in the depth of his struggle, things seemed hopeless. Then, Anglican priest, John Wesley, sent a letter to Wilberforce saying, “Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them stronger than God? Be not weary in well doing! Go on, go on in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish before it.” Wesley’s words were encouraging and a summons to faith for Wilberforce, a summons to live a faith that **perseveres** because faith and discipleship are never easy.

The great temptation of Christianity is always to have a sugar-coated Christianity with a sugar-coated cross and eliminate the great call to discipleship **in** this world. Our greatest temptation is that the cares, riches, and pleasures of this life become more important than the call of Jesus Christ. And so, worship of family, our jobs, sporting events, our homes, our vacations, all become more important to us than Christ and God's mission in this world. The result is faith that is like a watered-down wine; it is middle class Christianity; it is complacent Christianity; it is comfortable Christianity; it is what so much of American Christianity has become.

Yet, a life of **faith and discipleship** is a very real daring act of **courage**. In fact, one of my favorite theologians, Paul Tillich, in his book *The Courage to Be*, teaches just that – ***faith is a daring act of courage***. And, I would add that in many ways faith is a verb, faith brings forth action. You see, faith is the courage to affirm **being** in spite of the threat of non-being, the courage to affirm **life** in spite of death, the courage to affirm **hope** in spite of despair, the courage to **stand up** and **speak up** when everyone else just shuts up. Faith is **not** proof. Faith is **not** certainty. And, faith is **not** an insurance policy, especially a fire insurance policy for the next life. Faith **is** about boldly entering the struggles of life and **that** kind of faith and discipleship are risky. **That** kind of faith and discipleship **cannot**

be detached from our everyday experience and our daily pattern of living. And, yes, it **can** mean struggle and making hard choices.

Jesus was no stranger to struggle and making hard choices. He entered the struggle. Faith and discipleship mean participating **in** Jesus' mission and following the way of the **cross** which takes us into a reordering of our very lives. The cross is the sign of growth through struggle, and it is our willingness to enter the struggle that determines the pattern of our faithfulness as disciples. Discipleship happens when the cross is woven into the very fabric of our lives. When that occurs, our faith is defined by our response to the very demands and choices that are pressed upon us. This is the way in which God calls and invites us into God's mission of love, forgiveness, compassion, justice, and grace for the life of this **world**.

We are **not** called to live a sugar coated life of faith. We **are** called to **participate** in Christ's mission. And, as God works through us, Christ restructures us; Christ breaks down walls of division; Christ repairs us in order that we might become repairers of a broken world. God takes us into God's ongoing work of reconciling, binding up, and making whole. And, yes, it is demanding, and it can be costly and risky. However, we do not do this alone because it **is** Christ who is with us, Christ who is our **peace** as we continue to run with perseverance the race that is set before us.