

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

One of the Bible stories we shared with the kids this past week at Vacation Bible School was Jesus calling his disciples and making them “fishers of men.” I then asked the kids if they knew what a disciple was? One little girl said that a disciple was a friend of Jesus...I loved that answer. But then I explained to them that a disciple of Jesus was someone who *followed* Jesus. I then asked them how do *we* follow Jesus and dear little Paige quickly said...when we are nice to others. It was also Paige who said a disciple is a friend of Jesus. No wonder Jesus said,

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." (Mark 10:15)

It was a wonderful week with the kids sharing the love of God with them and teaching them about the kingdom of God in our Vacation Bible School program this past week. However, we are all taught by Jesus that receiving the kingdom of God like a child involves approaching it with childlike faith, humility, trust, and simplicity...seeing our faith and the love of God through eyes that are not veiled in prejudice, cynicism, and hatred...seeing God’s favor not just for ourselves but for others. But the hard part for us adults is to truly follow Jesus by simply being nice to others. There is a prayer in our hymnal we pray for guidance and it goes this way:

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with your most gracious favor and further us with your continual help, that in all our works, *begun, continued, and ended* in you, we may glorify your holy name and finally, by your mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>1</sup>

And so it is that we pray with these words for guidance in the best of times and we pray in the darkest of times with these very familiar words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm:

- <sup>1</sup> The Lord is my shepherd;  
I shall not be in want.
- <sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures  
and leads me beside still waters.
- <sup>3</sup> He revives my soul  
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- <sup>4</sup> Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I shall fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff,  
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- <sup>5</sup> You spread a table before me  
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and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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This is a great prayer in dark times when we are confused about where to go or who to follow. It's a great prayer because this prayer we know as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is emphasizing our dependence on God, seeking God's will, and acknowledging God's holiness and reminding us of God's nurturing care for us. It's a prayer that is non-threatening, in that, it reminds us that God meets us where we are in our hour of need or in the darkest of times as we venture through life or through our dark valleys, whatever they may be. However today we have a much more challenging call to follow. We are being challenged to *NOT* casually follow at times when it suites us, but to truly engage and follow the ways of our Lord with our whole heart and soul...and to not look back...but to move forward.

This morning, we hear that Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem, where he will undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised, (Matthew 16:21b). As Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem, his disciples were going along with him and discover that not everybody was as thrilled about Jesus as they were. We discover also that not everyone was ready to fully engage with Jesus and truly follow. And in this exchange in our Gospel lesson this morning between Jesus, his disciples, and others we seem to hear of a few different types of followers.

In our Gospel, we hear of those who are following but as they follow, they are threatening others as they go who don't see things as they do. We also hear about those who are willing to follow wherever Jesus will go without hesitation or agenda. And finally, we hear of those who will only follow on their terms. In these different types of followers, we can emblematically juxtapose their understanding of discipleship with three different kinds of Christianity we see in the world today...Christianity as taught by the example of Jesus Christ, legalistic Christianity as understood through our own desire for power over others, and secularized Christianity...secularized Christianity that plays out as "religion-less Christianity" or buffet style Christianity that we pick and choose what is unthreatening to ourselves and or meets my standards of how *I assume* Christianity works for me.

First in our Gospel lesson, we encounter the legalistic Christianity through James and John who want to reign down fire from heaven to destroy the Samaritans who would not receive Jesus. In James and John, we see the Christian who, in my opinion has very little faith because they are so threatened by others, they feel the need to impose their belief on others in order to secure or strengthen their own faith...or that they are too busy pointing out the sin of others that they forget about their own sin. In his treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther points this out in an open letter to Pope Leo X. Luther writes:

I am not so foolish as to attack one whom all people praise, (reference to Pope Leo X). As a matter of fact, I have always tried, and will always continue, not to attack even those whom the public dishonors, for I take no pleasure in the faults of any [person], since I am conscious of the beam in my own eye. I could not, indeed, be the first to cast a stone at the adulteress [John 8:8-11].<sup>2</sup>

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Nowadays, it is true, we are made so sensitive by the raving crowd of flatters that we cry out that we are stung as soon as we meet with disapproval. When we cannot ward off the truth with any other pretext, we flee from it by ascribing it to fierce temper, impatience, and immodesty.<sup>3</sup>

To another person Jesus said follow me and the response was, but first let me go and bury my father. I know how harsh the response from Jesus seems but it calls into question one's commitment to their faith or their sincerity about following. In this exchange we can see secularized Christianity or "religion-less Christianity" in that those being asked to follow find priority in other things other than faith. It seems as though these types Christians want to follow but only on their terms. It's almost like, "Yeah, I will follow, only if I can continue to do this or that"...or we can say, "yeah I'll follow, but only if my schedule will allow." We hear also in this Gospel lesson that as they going along the road someone said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus in a round-about way said to this person, are you sure about that and do you really know what you are saying or getting yourself into? I really hope that this guy goes ahead and does as he said. Jesus warned him about foxes having their dens and birds their nests because even Jesus has nowhere to lay his head. Still, I hope the man perseveres. I hope he hears about the foxes and the birds and says to himself, "Nonetheless, I have said I will follow Jesus wherever he goes, and I mean to do so! I am a man of my word. That's my story, and I'm sticking to it! I mean to follow Jesus from now on."<sup>4</sup>

But to follow Jesus is to follow our faith with a true and sincere heart just as Jesus has taught us...and to follow without reservation or hesitation and to follow in the suffering that accompanies discipleship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has written extensively on discipleship and has said this about following Jesus:

*It (meaning discipleship) is laid on every Christian...(discipleship is part of our faith). The first Christ-suffering that everyone has to experience is the call which summons us away from our attachments to this world. It is the death of the old self in the encounter with Jesus Christ. Those who enter into discipleship enter into Jesus' death. They turn their living into dying; such has been the case from very beginning. The cross is not the terrible end of a pious, happy life. Instead, it stands at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ. Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death.*<sup>5</sup>

Bonhoeffer, like Jesus is reminding us that following, or discipleship, and even our faith itself, in some sense, is not calling us to literally die or to commit ourselves to suicide, but our call to discipleship or to follow means to put aside our own egos, our own wants and needs, our own judgments, our own hatreds, prejudices, and fears for the betterment of others around us...or the betterment of the community which we become part of. But as we see in those who are attempting to follow Jesus in this passage before us today, this is not an easy call to follow. We all have the baggage of our hearts and our established lives that we just are not willing to part with. But at the same time, we still want to follow...so now what?

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Well, there is Good News because there is always Good News! If you will notice our Gospel lesson is prefaced with this seemingly insignificant line:

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51)

This line tells us that Jesus will undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised, reminding us once again of God's profound love for us...the depths of which are revealed through the sacrifice on the cross. Through the very faith we profess to have, we are invited to follow. Through the very faith we profess to have, we are *called* to follow. But we are called to follow in very sincere ways. But we follow in very self-centered ways...but nonetheless we follow. Keeping in mind that none of us follow as we ought, we simply follow as we are able. But this lesson today is not about what we can and can't do, the Good News is that Jesus Christ has set his face on Jerusalem.

He has followed HIS call...even to his death that frees us all. In Jerusalem he will be put to death on a cross...not to glorify himself, rather to reveal the glory of God and in that glory, we are set free from the bondage of sin, giving us the assurance of life eternal. Today the Good News is that none of us can truly "follow" what will take place on that cross. We follow Jesus *to* the cross but our discipleship and our journey of faith falls short, or I should say our journey falls at the foot of the cross. At the foot of the cross we hear Jesus cry out, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' (Luke 23:34). From that cross we are given grace for our shortfalls and on that cross, we see the promise of new life given to us by the one who is our refuge and strength, the one who will show us the true path of life, the one whose presence is the fullness of our joy.

From this horrible place, on the cross we see our friend being very nice to us all.

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Bonhoeffer, like Jesus is reminding us that following, or discipleship, and even our faith itself, in some sense, is not calling us to literally die or to commit ourselves to suicide, but our call to discipleship or to follow means to put aside our own egos, our own wants and needs, our own judgments, our own hatreds, prejudices, and fears for the betterment of others around us...or the betterment of the community which we become part of. But as we see in those who are attempting to follow Jesus in this passage before us today, this is not an easy call to follow. We all have the baggage of our hearts and our established lives that we just are not willing to part with. But at the same time, we still want to follow...so now what?

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He has followed HIS call...even to his death that frees us all. In Jerusalem he will be put to death on a cross...not to glorify himself, rather to reveal the glory of God and in that glory, we are set free from the bondage of sin, giving us the assurance of life eternal. Today the Good News is that none of us can truly "follow" what will take place on that cross. We follow Jesus *to* the cross but our discipleship and our journey of faith falls short, or I should say our journey falls at the foot of the cross. At the foot of the cross we hear Jesus cry out, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' (Luke 23:34). From that cross we are given grace for our shortfalls and on that cross, we see the promise of new life given to us by the one who is our refuge and strength, the one who will show us the true path of life, the one whose presence is the fullness of our joy.

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