

Discipleship and Following Jesus

Trinity 5 (July 24), 2011

Gospel: Luke 5:1-11

Our Gospel reading this morning, taken from the fifth chapter of Luke, tells of how the very first disciples came to follow Jesus. These first disciples—Simon Peter and his business partners, James and John—were commercial fishermen, and Jesus had borrowed one of their boats to serve as a pulpit while teaching the word of God to a crowd of people. This was on what the NT calls “the lake of Genneserat,” but we know it as the Sea of Galilee.

And when he was done teaching, and I guess as maybe a little payment for the use of the boat, Jesus turned to Simon Peter and told him to go into the deep water in the Sea of Galilee and let down his nets for a large catch of fish. Now, Simon Peter was an experienced fisherman, and he knew it was highly unlikely that he would catch any fish since the best fishing was done by night in the deep water. And he and his partners had already tried that the previous night and hadn’t caught anything. Nevertheless, he did what Jesus said and as a result he took in so many fish that his nets began to break. Then he called for his second boat, and he and his partners kept bringing in so many fish that both boats were filled and even began to sink.

Now, Simon Peter was completely amazed at this, and recognizing that he was in the presence of someone very holy and special, he reacted with some rather conventional piety. He fell down at Jesus’ feet, and proclaimed his unworthiness: “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” But Jesus responded, “Don’t be afraid. From now on you’re going to be catching men.” And it was at this point that Simon Peter and his partners brought their boats to the shore, left everything, and began following Jesus.

This Gospel account gives us the New Testament paradigm for discipleship, for following Jesus. And so let’s look together at what God’s word is teaching us about this most important topic of discipleship.

First, how does a person come to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus? Well, clearly **you have to be called by Jesus to follow him**. This is even more clearly spelled out in St. Mark's much briefer account of this same incident in his Gospel. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus simply calls out to Simon and says, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." You see, we don't really come to Jesus on our own but we come to him as a response to his call to us to follow him.

This is why evangelism, preaching, and sharing our faith with others is so important. Because no one can come to Jesus unless he or she first gets called by Jesus.

The second aspect of becoming a disciple, a follower of Jesus, as we see in this Gospel account, is a person has to **make a decision and then take positive action to follow Jesus**. In the case of Simon Peter, James, and John, they made a radical decision, didn't they, and took drastic action. They forsook everything and followed Jesus.

You see, to become a disciple, to be a follower of Jesus, is not merely an intellectual exercise. It's not simply a matter of thinking or of having certain beliefs—as important as these things are. Rather, it's a matter of obedience, of **doing** things, in response to the Lord's call.

In other words, it's not just talking the talk, but also walking the walk. It's putting our money where our mouth is.

And that brings us to the third and final aspect of becoming a disciple, a follower of Jesus. And that is, that **it's costly**. It's going to cost us. God's grace may be free, but it's certainly not cheap. Peter and his partners walked away from their entire livelihood and way of life in order to follow Jesus.

And that's at the heart of what it means to be a disciple. Because to leave everything and follow Jesus means that you believe in him. It means that you trust him. It means that you cast your reliance on him. It means you cut away all the props and the things that you have relied on in life and you cast your care on him.

I think our young people here from California this morning are showing us something very important about being a disciple, a follower of Jesus. They have traveled across the country, and are giving up a week of their summer in order to help others down in Rocky Mount, NC—which is exactly what Jesus said we have to do, namely, to love and serve others.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a brilliant young German Lutheran pastor, writer, professor, teacher, and theologian who was executed by the Gestapo at the very end of WWII, just weeks before the Allies liberated the concentration camp in which he was being held. For years Bonhoeffer had publicly and courageously spoken out against the Nazis and Hitler, and in the end he was martyred for it. One of Bonhoeffer's most important and influential books is called *The Cost of Discipleship*. And in *The Cost of Discipleship* Bonhoeffer writes powerfully against what he calls "cheap grace." Cheap grace is the idea that all a person has to do to be a Christian and be saved is to give general intellectual assent to the idea that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins.

Bonhoeffer writes, "cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principal, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

To be a disciple, to be a follower of Jesus, is the very opposite of Bonhoeffer's cheap grace. It is costly. It is demanding. It requires that we put Jesus Christ and his commandments and teachings above every other thing in our lives. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as for Simon Peter, it cost him his life.

May God grant us the courage and the ability, day by day, to forsake and relinquish each and every thing that stands in the way of our becoming true disciples and followers of Jesus Christ.