

Third Sunday after Pentecost – June 21, 2020

Introduction

Last week our theme was a **'Task of Great Urgency'** as we explored the outward directed vector of discipleship. **Why the urgency?** The answer is clear: **lives depended upon it.** Jesus knew human life for what it was. He knew the Galileans. He knew that their lives were marred by sin. He knew that this sin could only earn the wrath of God. And he knew that they would die without help. Their need was so great that they clutched at anything that gave them hope. St Matthew writes, **"They were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."**

Given the urgency of discipleship, Jesus reminds his followers that it will not be an easy task. Not only will there be skeptics, but oftentimes their opposition to the outward focus of discipleship will make it difficult for everyone. As I write today, we face twin crises: the coronavirus pandemic and the racism that continues to divide our country.

Each has the potential to be lethal for many people. We are getting weary of social distancing and hope to get back to lives that are normal. But **Covid-19** does not respect our heartfelt desire set aside all the precautions we have been living with since mid-March. I am saddened because I am seeing fewer people wearing masks and much larger public gatherings where social distancing is impossible. Unfortunately, public health professionals are noting sharp increases in **Covid-19** infections in cities and states that have prematurely set aside the stepped procedures set out by government officials and the Center for Disease Control [CDC]. Then, several days ago, another person of color was killed in an altercation with the Atlanta police in what should have been a routine encounter. Again, as details emerge, it is further evidence that something is wrong in our society. One wonders what the outcome would have been if the victim had not been a person of color.

"They were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." The words are more true today than when I wrote them last week. In today's Gospel, Jesus talks about the difficulty of the urgent task to which his disciples are called. Social change will not come easily. It is especially difficult when we

are sheltering in place in our homes and limiting our exposure to friends, family, and neighbors because of social distancing.

Perhaps we must fall upon one of our most ancient traditions. Prayer and guided spiritual reflection. I recommend the Psalms as a good place to start supplemented by a chapter by chapter reading of our lectionary Gospel of St. Matthew. Prayer is our communication with God. In addition to praying for our families and friends, we must also pray both for social healing and that God guide us as we continue to live with the pandemic. Please understand, I am not a fatalist. I believe strongly that God's grace is sufficient to sustain us and guide as we move ahead. Today's Gospel ends with words of hope. Jesus says those who are his disciples: **'ARE NOT TWO SPARROWS SOLD FOR A PENNY? YET NOT ONE OF THEM WILL FALL TO THE GROUND APART FROM YOUR FATHER.'** I will end this week's reflection with the words, **'God does not abandon the sparrow, even in death. So much the more for us.'**

*In Christ ✝,
Pastor Steve*

Gospel: Matthew 10.24-39

[Jesus said to his disciples,] "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! ²⁶So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

³²Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. ³⁴Do not think that I have

come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶and one's foes will be members of one's own household. ³⁷Whoever 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; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Comfortable Discipleship?

Let us pray. Almighty God, we are not the disciples you called us to be. We are silent when we should speak, proud instead of humble, and self-centered instead of self-giving. And sometimes, we are just afraid. But in the death of your Son Jesus Christ, you freed us from the prison of self and washed us in your life-giving grace.

Dearest Father, it is our prayer that you send your Spirit upon us to strengthen our faith. Reassure us that we are not alone and that what we do, we do in your name. Guide us so that, like Jesus, we might be servants of all our brothers and sisters. For it is in receiving them, that we receive him; and in receiving him, we receive you. We ask this in our Savior's name. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last fall, I saw something I hadn't seen for years: ***a 1958 Ford Edsel.*** It was parked in the Rosedale parking lot with a '***For Sale***' sign in the window. I don't know how many of you remember the ***Edsel?*** The new car was named for Henry Ford's oldest son and it was the Ford Motor Company's first attempt to introduce a revolutionary new design in its product line. It had a large vertical *horse collar* shaped grille with split bumpers. Automotive critics called it '***an Oldsmobile sucking a lemon.***' Those who were less charitable dubbed it '***a Mercury pushing a toilet.***'

I think you get the idea. The new ‘*look of the future*’ was not well received by the purchasing public. Sales were abysmal. The sad thing was that, *aside from styling*, the **Edsel** was quite a good car. There were many innovations and safety features in its design. From all accounts, the basic engineering was ahead of its time.

But Ford’s problem was a bad marketing strategy. From a marketing point of view, it is beyond comprehension that there were no focus groups or market surveys to test the **Edsel’s** new look. They were not in tune with what consumers wanted. Ford simply assumed that car buyers would ‘love’ the new front end. It was a bad marketing strategy. Not only did it not sell, but the car became the object of ridicule. After catastrophic losses, production was discontinued in 1960.

You need a marketing strategy to sell in today’s competitive market. Modern consumers are very sophisticated. One marketing strategy is called ‘*test marketing*.’ And because of its demographics, Peoria, Illinois is frequently chosen as the place where new products are first introduced.

Why Peoria? Peoria, Illinois is the geographic center of the United States; it has diverse ethnic communities; it represents the age spectrum of consumers; and its politics are both liberal and conservative. So much so that our national political parties regard it as a ‘*weathervane*’ community. If an idea, a person, or a product will sell in Peoria, Illinois, chances are that it will sell in Los Angeles, Topeka, Omaha, Kansas City, and perhaps even in Little Falls and Hillman, Minnesota. The big question is: ***Will it sell in Peoria?***

With this in mind, I would like you to think about discipleship — Especially Jesus’ description of discipleship in today’s Gospel. ***Will it sell in Peoria? Better yet, will it sell here in Little Falls and Hillman?***

Today’s Gospel reading, follows Jesus’ call of the twelve. They were called to preach the Gospel saying, ‘***the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.***’ But not all people would welcome their message. Jesus told them that he was sending them out ‘***AS SHEEP IN MIDST OF WOLVES . . . BEWARE FOR MEN WILL DELIVER YOU UP TO COUNCILS, AND FLOG YOU IN SYNAGOGUES, AND YOU***

WILL BE DRAGGED BEFORE GOVERNORS AND KINGS FOR MY SAKE TO BEAR WITNESS BEFORE THEM . . .'

When Jesus defined discipleship in this way, he forever destroyed the image of the comfortable disciple. Once and for all, he dashed all hopes that discipleship could be heroic. To be a disciple is to deny oneself, to take up the cross, and to follow him. To be a disciple is to join him in the suffering of others. There is no such thing as *'safe discipleship.'*

And to be quite honest, this is not exactly what we expected when we signed up as disciples of Jesus. Like the disciples, we were looking for something a bit different; something more to our liking; something more religious, if you will. Jesus does not ask his disciples to withdraw from the world. Instead, he asks only that they follow him into the world on a journey of faith. Jesus asks that his disciples give themselves willingly in the service of others just as he gave himself willingly for them. ***But here is the question: Will his vision of radical discipleship sell in Peoria? Or is it just another example of bad marketing strategy?***

Bad marketing strategy or not, this is the discipleship to which Jesus calls his church today. He calls you and me to this same unrelenting discipleship. Not only are we baptized into his death and resurrection, we are also baptized into his mission. And make no mistake, it might not be a pleasant experience. Pain, sickness, and loss pay our faith no heed. A world which should applaud our struggles, laughs at our defeats. Discipleship is not easy. As a matter of fact, it's far more difficult than we ever imagined. We who follow Jesus are not well loved by our more worldly cousins. Sometimes they tell us we're impractical; at other times, they ridicule what we say; and at still other times, they may even persecute us for our beliefs. But according to Jesus, this should come as no surprise. This is exactly what his disciples should expect.

After the ***Sermon on the Mount*** [Matthew 5-7], Jesus began to preach and teach in Galilee. But the task was overwhelming. There were so many who needed to hear the good news of the Kingdom. To Jesus, the Galileans were ***'harassed and hopeless, like sheep without a shepherd.'*** In the verses that immediately precede today's Gospel, Jesus commissioned the Twelve to

proclaim the coming of the Kingdom. But before they set out, he told them how the world will react to their words: **“A DISCIPLE IS NOT ABOVE THE TEACHER, NOR A SERVANT ABOVE THE MASTER . . . IF THEY HAVE CALLED THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE THE ‘PRINCE OF DEVILS,’ HOW MUCH MORE WILL THEY MALIGN THOSE OF HIS HOUSEHOLD? . . . WHAT I SAY TO YOU IN THE DARK, TELL IN THE LIGHT; AND WHAT YOU HEAR WHISPERED, PROCLAIM FROM THE ROOFTOPS . . . DO NOT FEAR THOSE WHO CAN KILL THE BODY BUT CANNOT KILL THE SOUL; RATHER FEAR HIM WHO CAN DESTROY BOTH SOUL AND BODY IN HELL.”**

Jesus destroyed the image of comfortable discipleship forever. He reminds us that it may well be costly to follow him. Even our families may not understand. Jesus talks about division in our families because of him . . . Painful division because those who should understand, but do not. We need to be clear that Jesus is not advocating the breakup of the family. Jesus defends the sanctity of marriage and the honoring of one’s father and mother. But even these sacred obligations come second to the in-breaking of God's Kingdom. The new world of life is far more important because it gives meaning to everything else. It is only in loving Jesus that we can truly love those whom God has given to us as family.

Discipleship is a question of priorities. And this, I think, is reason for conflict. The world did not understand Jesus, and it will not understand those who are his disciples. But nonetheless, Jesus says to disciples both past and present, **‘WHAT I TELL YOU IN THE DARK, SPEAK IN THE DAYLIGHT; WHAT IS WHISPERED IN YOUR EAR, PROCLAIM FROM THE ROOFTOPS.’** There can be no such thing as ‘secret discipleship.’ Each of us, be it at home or in the work place, has the opportunity to either deny Jesus or stand up for him by making moral decisions according to his Word.

Such decisions include how we deal with our sexuality, both as married and single people. God has set down some very specific guidelines for use of this gift . . . guidelines which our world ridicules as being ‘old fashioned’ or naive.

Or what about the way we accept strangers who live among us? Remember: Jesus sought out the woman of Samaria and healed the Roman centurion's

daughter, even though Samaritans and Romans were hated simply because of their nationality. Can we, in our community, do less?

And what about our pursuit of success? Jesus warns his followers about the dangers of materialism and reminds them that God must come before anything else in a person's life. Yet we live in a world that has willingly sold its very soul to the god of success, as measured by the number of cars in the driveway, the size of our homes, the horsepower of our boats, the goods we possess, the size of our salaries, and our prestige in our the community.

And finally, what about the hatred and anger that divides us as a people? What about the many divisions in our community? . . . Divisions between neighbors, between lake people and city folk, between parents and children, between brothers and sisters? And this just scratches the surface. Jesus, the one who admonishes us to 'turn the other cheek' and to forgive those who wrong us, must grieve as he sees us live amidst our broken relationships. There is simply no room for hatred and anger in the life of a Christian. The events of the past months bear witness to the fact that there is still a racial divide in our nation . . . A divide that is now finally being addressed.

So, will all this sell in Peoria? I don't know. And as a matter of fact, I suspect that Jesus doesn't care whether it sells in Peoria or in any other place. Jesus is not here to sell us a anything. Instead, he's come among us to bear witness to a new way of living — ***A way that puts God before all else.*** He speaks difficult words to a reluctant people who are content in their brokenness. Jesus knows all too well that the world does not like to hear his words. He knows how frightening it is to challenge the world, even with the truth of the Kingdom. Jesus knows because he did so and was crucified for it.

But the good news today is that death and the world do not have the last word. ***GOD DOES.*** *Death could not hold Jesus . . . And today, this same Jesus speaks to us as the Lord of the living and the dead.* To those who would follow him, to those who must also speak difficult words, Jesus says, ***'ARE NOT TWO SPARROWS SOLD FOR A PENNY? YET NOT ONE OF THEM WILL FALL TO THE GROUND APART FROM YOUR FATHER. SO DO NOT BE AFRAID; YOU ARE OF***

MORE VALUE THAN MANY SPARROWS.' Since death has no power over Jesus, it has no power over us either.

Note the words, **'YET NOT ONE OF THEM WILL FALL TO THE GROUND APART FROM YOUR FATHER.'** God does not abandon the sparrow, even in death. So much the more for us. The promise of our baptism, guaranteed by the death and resurrection of Jesus, is that we will never be apart from our Father in heaven in life, in death, and in life again. ***Will that sell in Peoria? Will that sell in Little Falls and Hillman?***

You bet it will — Jesus is with us. Amen.