

Sermon Proper 7A (2)

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Matthew 10:24-39

Jesus said to the twelve disciples, "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it 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!

"So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

"Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

"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 a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
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."

Epistle:

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him

I'm not gonna lie. Today's Gospel is hard. Today's Gospel reading builds on many of the challenging themes introduced in last week's gospel. The 10th Chapter of Matthew's Gospel begins as Jesus is

sending his disciples out to begin their ministries: He's empowering them to step up and step out to begin sharing his work of teaching and healing and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. It's a hard road Jesus calls his disciples to travel, and Jesus makes no bones about it. It's not going to be easy. "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves." No one can accuse Jesus of false advertising. At least with Jesus there's no "bait and switch".

"Make no mistake", Jesus says to his disciples—the original twelve, and all of us. "You will face conflict. You will face opposition. You will face rejection. You will face persecution. You will face failure. You will face suffering. You will face death. But—if any of you are still listening...hear this: do not be afraid. God's Kingdom has come near, and you belong to that kingdom. Yes, there will be loss. But what you will gain is ultimately, infinitely greater than everything you will lose."

"My friends," Jesus says, "I am putting my trust in you by inviting you to join in my work. Now, will you put your trust in me?"

I sometimes wonder why anyone ever chooses to follow Jesus, when he's so upfront and honest about what it will cost. But then I remember my most beloved teachers—they were always the ones who demanded the most of me, who pushed me beyond my self-imposed limitations, who enabled me to learn and develop and stretch and grow and do and create and experience more than I imagined was possible. I bet that most of you can remember a person who did that for you...that teacher, that mentor, that supervisor, that coach, that commanding officer, that family member.

(In fact, if you're looking for a meaningful way to start a conversation today during Coffee Hour, you might start by inviting someone to tell you about the memorable teachers in their life.)

Who were those teachers for you? The ones who demanded so much of you because they knew you were capable of so much. The ones whose high expectations and pointed corrections and heavy demands you learned not only to bear, but to welcome, because you came to trust they were born, not of judgment, but of love and hope and vision for your future and the future of your team, or department, or community. "Yes, the road ahead will be hard," those teachers would say. "But it's your road to travel. And no other road is really worth the journey."

In a similar manner we, as disciples (followers, students) of Jesus, hope to learn over time not only to bear but to welcome the expectations and corrections and demands Jesus places on us because we have come to trust these are born, not of judgment, but of love and hope and vision for our future and the future of our world.

"Yes," Jesus says, "the road will be hard. But it's the road you were created to travel. And no other road is really worth the journey."

There's a lot to unpack in today's Gospel, but what I want to focus on today is what it might mean for us to be disciples (a word that literally means learners) in relationship to Jesus, our Teacher.

[In today's Gospel] Jesus says to the twelve disciples, "A disciple is not above the teacher... it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher"

It is enough for a disciple to be like the teacher. In Matthew, Chapter 10, Jesus is sending his disciples out into the world, "as sheep among wolves" to engage in a mission for which they are, in most senses, ill-prepared. They don't have an abundance of material resources to support them on their journey (remember the "take no silver, no bag, no extra shirt part" of last week's gospel?) ... and they don't have an abundance of knowledge or expertise or experience, either. All they have is Jesus, a beloved Teacher to follow and imitate.

It might not seem like much, but imitation in the context of trusting relationships is actually our primary mode of learning, as humans. "Ba ba ba" goes the baby. "Ba ba ba" goes the delighted papa. "Ma ma ma" goes the mama. "Ma ma ma" goes the delighted baby."

I see this fundamental process of learning by imitation unfold every week in our St. Mark's Montessori Preschool chapel. Especially in our toddler class. Even before they have words, the children watch and follow and eventually begin to do whatever Deacon David and I (their teachers) do in Chapel. At some point even our littlest friends—many still in diapers—can begin to imitate our gestures and actions with astonishing accuracy. We begin each week, by gathering together at the back of the church, then they follow us in procession up the center aisle and into Stoney Chapel, singing:

"Going to Chapel, Alleluia! Walk slowly, walk softly, Alleluia! Follow the cross, Alleluia! The cross is the leader, Alleluia! Look at the windows, Alleluia. See all the colors, Alleluia! Look at the icons, Alleluia. The pictures tell stories, Alleluia!"

As the year goes by, and the toddlers grow, many of them begin to acquire more proficiency spoken language, and they begin to imitate our words as well as our actions.

[Share story about Salvador, little boy whose speech exploded the week after Easter, so that he was echoing everything I said in chapel—in word, quality and tone!]

By the time our toddlers move up to the primary class, many of them are ready to lead our "Getting Ready" rituals—the actions and the words) all by themselves. "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth..."

I believe a parallel process unfolds for each of us, as students and disciples of Jesus. The process begins whenever we gather and begin watching, then trusting, then following our teacher together.

Like our preschool friends, sometimes we begin following the teacher, then something challenges or distracts us and we suddenly bolt (like Rocky) or wander (like Walker) in a different direction. In the context of a loving community, like our school or our church, someone is usually there to lovingly intercept us and guide us back into line with the teacher.

At first, it's a big enough challenge to just move in the same general direction as our teacher. We keep our eyes glued on the teacher for clues about what we're supposed to be doing and what's coming next. In time we grow more comfortable with following the leader, we recognize the pattern, we anticipate what might be coming next, we imitate and embody the teacher's words, actions, and tone with greater ease and confidence.

Even as the Teacher's path grows more complicated, the words more complex, the actions more challenging, even when we encounter something new, we students can usually still manage to follow, as long as our trusting connection with the teacher remains unbroken.

3 times in today's Gospel Teacher Jesus encourages his Students to be brave, stay connected, and keep trusting Him when things start to get tough:

"Have no fear...Do not fear...Do not be afraid." Jesus says

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Then he gives these instructions: "Take up the cross and follow me."

Wait. What? There are few of us who don't want to bolt at this point.

"Follow the Cross, Alleluia. The Cross is the leader, Alleluia."

Maybe my preschool friend, Rocky, had the right idea.

We can do LOTS of hard things, but we don't want to die.

Insecurity, poverty, rejection, and conflict. Okay. If we have to.

But not the cross. Anything but the cross.

"I'm sorry," Jesus says, "but there's a cross in this road."

The cross is an essential part of this journey.

For, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Like it or not—and mostly we don't—The cross is an essential part of our learning. Breaking and mending, scattering and gathering, losing and finding, dying and rising—these are crucial stages of ALL learning. Again and again, as we learn and grow and journey along the road we were created to travel:

We have to die to our illusions of mastery, so we can become disciples

We have to die to our idols of expertise, so we can become students

We have to die to our old patterns, so we can discover or create new patterns

We have to die to our old ways of understanding, so that we can understand in new ways

We have to die to what we have known, so that we can know new things

Above all,

We have to die to what we have been in order to become what we will be.

Every time we come to that Cross in the Road

We have to decide. It's risky, and it's scary, and often painful to go on... and it's also, in the end, our only hope.

"For," as we heard in today's Epistle: "If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him." Death is a necessary part of our journey as learners, but death is a bridge, not the end of the road.

True Learning—True Discipleship—always involves death. And make no mistake, I know, death is hard. When we, as students of Life, choose to follow a Teacher who tells the truth, who offers no shortcuts around death, we can expect to encounter fear and resistance from every angle. Powerful forces within and around us will constantly threaten to distract us from the Teacher and divert us from our Path.

But I believe Jesus is a Trustworthy Teacher, who will show us the way. If we follow him, and do our best to stay focused, and connected with him. If we listen to his Voice and trust him when he tells us: "Do not be afraid". If we strive to imitate him, first in our actions and then in our words, I believe our Teacher will go before us. He will not abandon us when we come to the Cross in the road. He will go with us, through death and into a new day of life, and love, and learning on the Way.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

...it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher...

Amen.