

“THE LORD’S DISCIPLES”

a sermon on Isaiah 9:1-4, I Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4:12-23
January 22, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
Sumner, Mississippi

As I said last week, although the Gospel writers differ in how they tell the story of Jesus’ birth and early life, they agree complete agreement about Jesus’ first “activity” of ministry. It was to bring together a “core group” of individuals who accepted his message, and desired to be his *disciples*. Our New Testament reading for the morning describes Jesus wandering about, “rounding up” some of that group, as he began to teach, preach, and perform miracles in the villages of Galilee.

In so doing, our Lord began a process that has been underway from that day until this - the process of *discipleship*. Discipleship is a *process*, because it doesn’t happen “all at once.” It takes a life time, and we never fully (in this life), get it completely right.

True, Peter and Andrew, and James and John, Phillip and the others left what they were doing, and *became disciples*. But only as they *listened* to Jesus’ teaching, and struggled to live as he taught, did they begin to *practice discipleship*.

A disciple means, simply, a *follower*. Discipleship, on the other hand, is the “discipline” of learning to be a better *disciple*. So, from shortly after the time of Jesus’ baptism, there have been disciples of Jesus. And from that time on, discipleship has been “practiced.”

To that extent, you and I have something in common with even the very first men and women who were attracted to Jesus and his message, and with what we sometimes call “the faithful in every age.” We have *all* been called to “discipleship.” We have all heard Jesus’ voice saying, “follow me.” We have all responded to that “call” in *some* form of commitment, even if that commitment was no more than to get up this morning, and get dressed, and come to this place to worship.

And so we have all taken at least “little” steps to *improve* ourselves and become what we think God wants us to be.

That much we have in common with our ancient brothers and sisters of New Testament times. But as I read their stories in the Scriptures – those first generation

disciples – it is painfully obvious to me that I, at least, do not have *everything* in common with them. They and I also have a great many differences – differences in *culture* and *heritage*, differences in *lifestyle* and *vocation*, differences in the *challenges* that confront us.

Which leads me to go back, for a moment, to even *older* times – *before* “Christian discipleship” existed, but when courageous men and women still attempted to listen for God’s voice, and respond in faith (which, after all, is what discipleship is all about).

In the days of Eli the Priest in ancient Israel, for example, God called a young man named Samuel to lead his people back to faithfulness. Samuel *listened* to God’s voice. He *grew* in discipleship, as he studied and prayed, there at the Temple in Shiloh. Samuel became one of Israel’s most significant voices of faith. He anointed Kings, and advised several *generations* of the nation’s leaders.

Centuries later, in the days of the prophet Isaiah, discipleship took a different *form* – the form of a call from God to proclaim both God’s judgment and God’s ultimate mercy and grace to Israel, in response to the nation’s sins.

Those are just two of a whole *host* of examples from the Scriptures, indicating that discipleship, and the *forms* that it takes are dependent upon the *time* in which we live, so that the question is not simply, “what does it mean to be the Lord’s disciples?” but rather, “what does it mean to be the Lord’s disciples *in our time*?”

In Moses’ time, discipleship was learning to live together as a people, and being committed to the legal system that formed the basis of their communal life.

In David’s time, discipleship was being loyal to the king, and faithful in temple worship - helping the empire expand and prosper.

In the prophet Zechariah’s time, it was working to *restore* a city and temple that had been destroyed, praying for the day of restoration.

In New Testament times, discipleship was being faithful in the midst of Roman persecution, and as Paul indicates, seeking to remain *united* despite various differences.

And we could continue. For many centuries, discipleship meant building the “institution” of the Christian Church – weaving it together with civil government, in an attempt to build a “Christian Empire. But in the days of the Reformation, it

meant, for many, making conscious choices about the *form* faith would take, and then being willing to defend that choice – often at the risk of putting their own safety as well as their relationships with family and friends in peril.

Over the course of Christian history, discipleship has taken many and varied forms, each of which has been an attempt to interpret the demands of the Gospel *at* a particular point in time, and *in* a particular set of circumstances. So then, what about *our* time? What does it mean to be a disciple in the year of our Lord, 2017?

As in all times of the “Christian era,” it means professing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It means working to spread the Good News, and establish the kingdom. But the particular *forms* of that proclamation, and our *vision* of the kingdom are among the factors that need to be “timely” – that need to *match* the time and circumstances in which we live. And our *task* as the Christian Church, it seems to me, is to *discover* what it means to be “the Lord’s Disciples” in *our* day.

As an example, I’ve traveled twice, as the Executive of St. Andrew Presbytery, to Cameroon, where Presbyterian missionaries a hundred years ago began a great work for the sake of God’s kingdom, which is now bearing great fruit in the form of *thousands* and *thousands* of Cameroonians who faithfully worship in Christian Churches each week, and strive to be faithful, in exceedingly difficult circumstances. The Presbyterian Church in Cameroon is, today, larger and in some ways stronger than its “mother Church,” the PC(USA).

When I see what those missionaries did, I am truly *amazed* – amazed in part because of what it must have *cost*, and knowing that if we were just now getting around to *beginning* our work in that land, we would never be able to afford it. There were massive numbers of physicians, and craftsmen, and teachers who answered the call to be disciples in that land, and they built amazing churches, and schools, and hospitals.

And then I have traveled around this presbytery and worshiped with folks like you here in Sumner in beautiful church buildings very many of which the congregations who worship in them today would not be able to afford to build.

I was the pastor of a church like that, down in Laurel, Mississippi. Were it not for the “lumber barons” of the early 1900's in that part of the state, churches like the Laurel Church wouldn’t exist – and wouldn’t have the “heritage” of faithful service to our God over these decades.

But our time is different. And we wonder whether we can even afford to keep these places in good *repair* any more, and pay for pastoral staff to keep their ministries going.

A few years back, I consulted with the Evergreen Church in Memphis that had a physical plant built for a congregation of 2,000 members or more. It also had a staff that included, at the time, three full time ministers. The problem was, it only had about 250 members left in it. Discipleship in *their* day had turned out to mean making some very *difficult* decisions about future – facing some hard *realities*, and trying to turn what seems like “defeat” into a hopeful future, which they did. They sold their facility to Rhodes College, transitioned their staff, called a new pastor, and found a place to worship that suited their current needs.

I’m not suggesting such changes are necessary for this or any other congregation. I’m just saying that circumstances change, and being “faithful” in one time may look very different than being faithful in *another*.

So, Jesus came to Peter and Andrew, who were busily fulfilling their callings as “fishermen,” and he said, “follow me, and I will make you fish for *people*.”

So, what *does* it mean to be the Lord’s disciples today – in our time. That’s not an easy question. But it is an exceedingly *important* one. Your session has a retreat coming up when we will be asking that question – pondering what God is calling *this* little gathering of disciples to be and do, for the sake of the Kingdom.

I don’t know exactly where that will lead. I personally believe this congregation has a great deal to offer, and that despite our small numbers, we have a kind of vitality that is lacking in many other churches. But what I know for certain is that like Simon and Peter, and James and John, and the others who Jesus gathered together in those opening days of his ministry, we need to *listen* for God’s voice, and then we need to *respond* in faith. The Good news of the Gospel is that God hears, God speaks, and God *gives* us strength to become the faithful disciples we are called to be.

To God be the glory. Amen.