

“THE ROAD TO DISCIPLESHIP”

a sermon on Acts 2:14a, 36-41; I Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

April 30, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller

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Our Gospel lesson this morning is a wonderful little narrative that William Barclay has called one of “the immortal short stories of the world.” Because it is located in Luke’s account, it takes place in the form of a brief drama — one that could easily be “scripted” into a little play with three scenes: one on the road, one in a house in the village of Emmaus, and a third back in Jerusalem.

I titled this sermon, “The Road to Discipleship.” “Discipleship” is a definite theme of the Lectionary texts in Easter – as we “tag along” with Jesus’ followers and participate in their grappling for the very first time in Christian history with what it means to be a “disciple of the Risen Lord” . . . and for that matter, what it does *not* mean.

Today’s story from Luke’s account, together with the reading from Luke’s *continuation* of the Gospel narrative which we call the Book of the Acts, give us a sort of “big picture” look at discipleship, which I think is first very well summarized in the “Emmaus Road” story.

And if we take these individuals and their experience that day as a sort of “model” for us, I think we can note a number of distinct characteristics of discipleship in their encounter with Jesus and their immediate response to it.

The first characteristic is evident in their opening words to Jesus. In the midst of explaining both their grief and their amazement at the events of the day, they say to Jesus, “but we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

Now, granted, their vision of redemption and restoration was incomplete. Maybe even downright incorrect. But it *was* a vision — a vision of what they wanted to come about, of what a “better life” looked like.

And that, I think, is the first mark that distinguishes a “disciple,” a person who has *decided* to follow Jesus, from a “seeker,” a person of honest inquiry who has not yet made that decision. Don’t get me wrong. I love seekers. They are the hope of the Church’s future, after all. But the question is, how can you tell if you’ve moved *beyond* that . . . to something else. Disciples are learners. They don’t

profess to know everything. But they do begin their new quest with *some sort* of a vision for something better . . . a better life, better calling, better world.

And conversely, until we are ready to admit that we aren't perfect, that we need something Christ and the Church have to offer, we aren't on "the road to discipleship."

It was because of their perspective, I am certain, that those two individuals were willing to listen to Jesus on that road, willing to consider what he had to say. They still had a vision. And it still guided them. But clearly, the vision also greatly *evolved* as a result of their encounter with Jesus. He "re-formed" it, if you will.

And a second characteristic, then, is evident in Jesus' teaching that day. We are told that "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself."

We are a people of "interpretations." The Old Testament must be interpreted in light of the Christ event. And a set of interpretations about scripture, taken together, constitute a tradition. Discipleship means adopting a tradition of interpretation with respect to the scriptures. It means learning that tradition, and participating in it.

There are Christians who would deny that to be the case – who profess that Christian traditions are purely "man made," and not "of God," and that Scripture can be read and understood on its own terms *without* an interpretative framework or history. But ironically, those who make that proclamation themselves form one interpretive "school," if you will, that even if unofficially has developed its own orthodoxy of right belief.

We Presbyterians really differ from some other Christian communities, in my opinion, only in that we *value* our "doctrinal" approach to the faith, and affirm it so openly. It is our particular tradition of interpretation. There are others. But it is ours.

In the introduction to his Institutes of the Christian Religion — a massive two volume work by the founder of our "tradition," John Calvin expressed it like this: "Although Holy Scripture contains a perfect doctrine . . . yet a person who has not much practice in it has good reason for some guidance and direction, to know what he ought to look for in it, in order not to wander hither and thither, but to hold to a sure path, that he may always be pressing on toward the end to which the Holy Spirit calls him."

On the road to discipleship, we must adopt some set of “lenses” with which to view the scriptures. And “adopting” that set of lenses is a learning process. As Jesus taught the two followers that day, they listened, and they learned. They studied. And later on, when the Christian community was growing, they continued to study. The book of Acts records that the early community devoted itself to four activities, the very first and foremost of which was “the apostles’ teaching;” that is, to learning the perspective of the Apostles, their framework of interpretation, what became their tradition – and what eventually became (and remains) *ours*.

Discipleship characteristic number three. It is recorded that “when he was at table with them, he took bread and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened.”

William Barclay, again, points out that this not a reference to the sacrament we celebrate. Just an ordinary meal. But it is more than that. He took bread, and blessed it, and gave it to them. It was the symbolic act of bread breaking and passing from the old Jewish table liturgy, designed to turn the simple, biological act of “eating,” into a communal experience by connecting it to ancient signs and symbols and practices.

When Jesus once again engaged in that ritual with them — as he had with his followers so many times before — they immediately *knew* him, and at that moment they became a part of the resurrection communion. So I would take issue with Dr. Barclay on that point. I think it *was* Holy Communion they shared that day, in the very best sense of the word. Not our “Sacrament” in the formal sense, perhaps, but clearly “holy communion” in a more general, but no less profound, way.

Being on the Road to Discipleship means *being in communion* with the fellowship. It means participating in the signs and symbols that turn the ordinary into the extraordinary, a simple meal into a feast, and a moment of enlightenment. It means developing your *soul* — your inner life of spiritual awareness – in which we recognize and participate in our connection with Christ, and with each other.

The full set of activities in which the early church engaged, according to the book of Acts, was “The Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers.” Discipleship means participation in the life of faith, *and the community of faith*.

And then finally, the little drama ends back in Jerusalem where it says that “they told what had happened on the road and how he was known to them.”

Instantly, as they became disciples of the Risen Lord, those two had a mission. They had a message, and they immediately began to proclaim it. The Road to Discipleship is a mission road.

When Jesus appeared to the Apostles in the first chapter of Acts, he told them, “you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”

And so they were . . . or at least, so they tried to be. The point is, he gave them a mission: a work to do, a place in the progress of the kingdom. To be a disciple is to have a place, to at least *begin* to understand what your “role” in life is, and to understand it as a part of “God’s plan” not only for your life, but for the end toward which the whole world is headed.

And so, what we do with our lives matters. Not everyone is “called” to full time ministry or “church vocation.” But we are *all* called to *participate* in God’s mission in the world – including in and through how we make our living. At the very least, disciples are people who are concerned about how their life’s work, whatever it might be, benefits others and not just themselves. For many disciples, their greatest witness is simply being ethical and caring — and particularly toward those in need. For others it is something more directly related to the “proclamation” of the Good News. As Paul pointed out on several occasions, the “body of Christ” is composed of many “parts,” all of which are necessary for the functioning of the whole.

Well there it is. Four characteristics of Discipleship: a vision for something better and a recognition that neither we nor the world around us is perfect, attention to a tradition of interpretation, communion (through participation in communal acts, and attention to the symbolic and the spiritual), and an understanding of God’s mission in the world, and our participation in it.

Think about it. And to God be the Glory.