

Authentic Discipleship
September 8, 2013
Psalm 1 & Luke 14:25-33

Psalm 1

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish."

Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?

If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Let us pray . . . In a world filled with many good things that seemingly bring happiness, Jesus challenges us to embrace a way of living that prioritizes the realm of God above everything else. Help us to look within and see that which is at the core of who we are, and how we live our lives. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

When I accepted the invitation to serve as your guest preacher this morning, I did so without first consulting the lectionary. When I took a look at this morning's Gospel reading I had second thoughts.

Surely a first time visiting preacher should focus on stories of the power of Jesus' inclusive love, not passages in which he suggests that his followers may need to hate their loved ones.

I considered my options. I could call back and say thanks but after giving this more thought, I think I'll pass. I could ignore this passage by pretending I had not visited your congregation's website and noted that your previous preacher had followed the lectionary with a heavy reliance on the Gospel readings. Or maybe I could just read it as one of several readings then ignore it in my preaching.

As I pondered these possibilities, I realized there was only one approach that would do: preach the Gospel passage, emphasizing rather than ignoring its real challenge. Here and throughout the Gospels, Jesus uses words that grab our attention and reorient our thinking. Jesus teaches that unless we get our priorities in order, it won't be possible to follow him.

- When Jesus called his first disciples, he asked them to walk away from their professional pursuits and simply follow him.¹
- When Jesus encountered a rich man wanting to know what it would take to experience eternal life, Jesus invited him to sell all he had and give it to the poor -- then follow him.²

But, I am getting ahead of myself. Let me return to Psalm 1.

¹ Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16-20, and Luke 5:1-11

² Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10: 17-31, and Luke 18:18-30

The first Psalm plays an important role in the Book of Psalms, and in preparing us for the lesson Jesus offers us this morning. This Psalm found its way to be first in a collection of 150 because it sets the tone for all of the Psalms; it both introduces the Psalms and summarizes their content. We can live our lives in one of two ways: self-directed or God-directed.

Only you know which lifestyle you are leading. The reality is that most of the time outside observers cannot differentiate the two. And, frankly, sometimes the self-directed person will find her or his way to church and put on a rather convincing show as one who is God-directed. The real issue here is one of authenticity.

The young actor Angus T. Jones awakened to a need to be authentic late last year. He made headlines when he told viewers to stop watching the top tv rated show on which he had acted for 10 years. His plea came about as the result of his conservative Christian religious convictions, which suggested the lifestyle portrayed by his character Jake and the others on the show "Two and a Half Men" were "filth."³

While Angus is a very public figure, his struggle is one with which we can all identify. He reached a point at which he felt he could no longer pretend to be one person on screen and another off screen. Many of us have reached similar conclusions regarding the many roles we play in life. Being authentic means being the same person at all times.

Interestingly, in recent years authenticity has become a cultural buzzword. In a world filled with hypocrites, people increasingly notice and value those who are who they claim to be. Put differently, being real really matters.

Prioritizing a God-directed life and seeking to live it out in an authentic manner are central to Jesus' message in the Gospel reading. The argument Jesus advances is straightforward: discipleship isn't easy.

Following Jesus means being willing
to forgo bonds with our family and all other relationships;
to follow wherever he leads, even to the point of carrying a cross;
and to be willing to give up anything that gets in the way.

³ Cavan Sieczkowski, "Angus T. Jones of 'Two and a Half Men' Will 'Likely' Be Leaving After this Season."
<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/29/angus-t-jones-two-and-a-half-men-likely-leaving_n_2210801.html>

The message Jesus shares with the crowd is a difficult one. It is antithetical to the consumer-centric programs offered at so many of our country's largest churches, and is certainly at odds with what many of the well known televangelists preach. Jesus is talking about high commitment Christianity.

While Madison Avenue marketing types might suggest this form of the faith will not sell well, they would be wrong. Rodney Stark, a well known sociologist of religion who teaches at Baylor University and serves as the Director of their Institute for Religious Studies, explains that "more demanding religious groups" do better than those who ask less of their adherents.⁴ He writes:

In the case of religion, people do not flock to faiths that ask the least of them, but to those that credibly offer the most religious rewards for the sacrifices required to qualify.⁵

Stark presents data suggesting that is nothing new; in fact, it has been true throughout our nation's history. Those churches that apply Jesus' challenging message continue to fare better than others when it comes to recruiting and retaining members.

Clearly following Jesus isn't easy, but changes everything. To help his original listeners count the cost Jesus relates twin stories that could well be called "Fools at Work and at War."⁶

Rather than retell those, I will offer my own contemporary examples.

But first, a warning is in order:
these may be a bit too close for comfort.

Which of you would plan to build a new custom home without creating a detailed budget, and ensuring you have the necessary funds to complete construction? If you do not count the cost and only partially build the home, then it will be worthless and you will be the laughing-stock of your community.

⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (HarperOne, 2011), 363.

⁵ Ibid, 363.

⁶ R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX* (Abingdon Press, 1995), 292.

Or can you imagine the leader of a powerful nation choosing to begin a military endeavor without a clear plan of action and agreed upon desirable outcomes? If he did not count the cost and launches an attack to satisfy the requests made of him, then his nation may endure military, political and economic consequences that linger long after he leaves office.

Hearing these stories should flood our minds with thoughts related to the wide ranging costs associated with any endeavor of significance. Cost, after all, is rarely just about money.

The decision to build a home, begin a military campaign, or become a disciple should not be made lightly. Or, as modern language version of the Bible has Jesus say (Luke 14:33):

Simply put, if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple.⁷

Discipleship isn't cheap, but it is well worth the cost.

Authentic discipleship isn't easy, but it is essential.

These challenging words call for action. So, I invite you to join me in committing to prioritize the God-directed life by choosing to live as an authentic disciple.

Together as followers of the way of Jesus and participants in this community of faith known as United Church, may we be known by our authenticity. Amen.

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson. *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. (NavPress, 2002), <<http://www.biblestudytools.com/>>.