

Difficult Discipleship

Romans 6:1-11 & Matthew 10:24-39

Eastminster Presbyterian Church

June 25, 2023

This morning's Scripture lessons offer much to consider. To ready us for that experience, let us pray . . . Loving God, we trust that you are always faithful - even and perhaps especially when the path of life and the journey of faith are difficult. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

As the Executive Director of a non-profit that is powered primarily by volunteers, I'd like to think I know a thing or two about recruiting volunteers.

So . . . just for Eastminster, I've worked up a special invitation – one I've never offered before and may never offer again.

Please come volunteer at White Rock Center of Hope.

Our Food Pantry distributes nearly 500,000 pounds of food a year. There is so much heavy lifting to do. Many strong backs needed. And there is a big box truck to drive. Sophisticated equipment to operate. We even offer walk in refrigeration – very cold spaces you can work inside of all morning long. Thousands of neighbors rely on us as the source of their next meals. Don't worry – there's no reason to be afraid.

Between our Clothing Closet and our Thrift Store we receive and process nearly 200,000 gently used articles of clothing a year. Most of the donations show up at our side door. We'll need your help to unload donor vehicles – especially during the hottest part of the day. Don't be concerned or afraid, our donation drop-off area is outside with direct sunlight and the heat index should climb past 115 degrees most days this week.

Or, just come on over first thing Monday morning and get started as a volunteer interpreter. You only speak English? Don't hesitate or be afraid, I'm sure you can learn another language in the next 24 hours.

Do I sound ridiculous? Would any of these appeals work?

By emphasizing the most difficult tasks and the ones you're least likely to be interested in, I've probably scared you away. And, I'm pretty sure I violated every rule of marketing.

Why would I do this?

I imagine you now feel somewhat like Jesus' first disciples felt after they heard him deliver his famous pep talk – you know . . . the one in the Gospel lesson I read just a few moments ago.

Let me put that passage in context. The Gospel reading begins in the 24th verse of the 10th chapter of Matthew. If we back up to the 1st verse, we learn that this whole chapter is a story about Jesus preparing his first 12 disciples to go out into the world and do ministry.

Our part of the chapter is heavy on details and filled with challenging words. It includes Jesus, the great motivator of his volunteers – the ones we call disciples – warning them about what's ahead.

Jesus tells the disciples – not once or twice, but three times – not to be afraid.

In verse 26, in verse 28, and again in verse 31 he repeats his request, "do not fear." And, he even warns them that whatever fate awaits teachers also awaits disciples.¹

This is Jesus being real. He's letting his disciples know that following the Way of Jesus while out and about in the wider world will often be difficult.

Newsflash: This hard message isn't just for this first group of disciples; it is also for you and for me.

So, this morning, I hope you'll remember 3 things.

First, remember caution. The life of discipleship begins with a warning – a caution sign – a call to count the cost.

Whether or not it was included in Sunday school, you need to know that Jesus cautions all would be followers. He sets forth detailed parameters for how to follow marked by high expectations.

¹ Stanley Saunders. "[Commentary on Matthew 10:24-39](#)" (Working Preacher.)

He shares the good, the bad, and the ugly.

This first group of disciples hears about many potential worst-case scenarios from being detained by the government or flogged for their witness (v.17) to being hated and persecuted (v.22-23).

Before they begin, these disciples are invited to count the cost.

Before we are sent into the world to live, work, and worship in Jesus' name we must do likewise.

Friends, you've been warned. Heed the caution and proceed at your own risk.

Second, remember commitment. This whole discipleship thing is about making a lifelong commitment to living as a follower of Jesus.

The commitment begins in baptism when we are marked as Christ's own forever.

In our Epistle reading, we were reminded that our baptism is an act of radical identification. We were baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection (v.3-5). And, we are told to consider ourselves "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v.11).

We intentionally reaffirm our baptismal commitment when we name the commitment others made on our behalf as our own at our confirmation and each time we join a new congregation.

Committed disciples know that hardship happens. Before starting our journey, we were cautioned. If we paid attention to the fine print, then we also know that Jesus' list of warnings is a representative list not an exhaustive one.

For the earliest disciples, being persecuted for their faith was expected. I'm grateful to have been born at a time and place where I've had religious freedom, but I'll confess that nothing prepared me for the hardest challenge we've all endured: the COVID-19 pandemic.

Being committed means having faith that is strong enough to find a way or make a way.

I imagine each of us here today has multiple personal stories we can tell about how we saw people with committed faith live that out in new ways during the pandemic.

New challenges led to creative new approaches. Worship is the most universal example. For all of my life I had gathered in a church sanctuary each week for worship – a habit that I assume was familiar to you as well. Suddenly, we could not come together in this way for a season. Instead of giving up or forgoing worship, we found or created new ways to gather.

What about you and your commitment to Jesus?

- How was your faith tested by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How was it strengthened?

The simple fact that you did not drop out of church, but have continued on and are here this morning speaks to your commitment.

But keep in mind that living out a committed faith looks different in the lives of different people. And, it even looks different for each of us across our lifetime – especially when we face new challenges.

Third, and finally, remember consistent. Discipleship can't be accomplished just on Sunday mornings or just when it's convenient. Being a follower of Jesus requires us to consistently live the Way of Jesus.

What does this look like?

To begin, it looks like you . . . and you . . . and you! If I had thought of it sooner, I would have slipped small mirrors into your bulletins and would now invite you to use them to take a good look at yourself. To take a long look – to look closely – to see yourself a disciple.

Since that wasn't to be, instead, I invite you to replay in your mind something you said, thought, or did in the last few days that most clearly reflects your everyday discipleship.

Don't look for something big or special. Consistent discipleship is lived mostly in mundane moments.

What did you see? What memory came to mind first?

When you think of consistent discipleship, perhaps it is easier to call to mind your experience of others.

- In your life, who is it that has modeled a lifetime of discipleship in ways that have impacted and inspired you?
- Are any of these people present today?
- Do they know how important they've been in your life of faith?

Siblings in Christ. Followers of the Way. Disciples. The life of faith isn't always easy, but it is well worth pursuing.

Before I conclude, I want to circle back to where we started – with strong words of caution about volunteering at White Rock Center of Hope or going out into the world as a disciple of Jesus.

The cautions are real, but they are not the whole story. Both opportunities also include some very real perks alongside being granted the actual power or authority to accomplish the role.

At White Rock Center of Hope, we have volunteer roles for those who want to commit a little time or a lot. We have roles for those who want to do physical labor, those who prefer relational roles, and those seeking opportunities in an office or behind the scenes. We provide onboarding, training, and support and we have lots of ways we'll say thank you and celebrate your involvement. We'll be real that some days are more challenging than others. And, we'll trust that the best reward of all will be knowing you've helped neighbors in need receive hope in practical ways – including food, clothing, shelter.

Going back to the 10th chapter of Matthew . . . Jesus wanted the original 12 to know they were volunteering for a dangerous assignment. He granted them extraordinary powers – powers “to heal, exorcise demons, cleanse lepers, even to raise the dead.”² And, he ensured they knew the importance of their witness and that an ultimate reward would await all who did their part – even something as small as providing a cup of cold water in Jesus' name (v.42).

Difficult discipleship. We've been thinking together about a challenging topic: difficult discipleship.

You now know that disciples are **cautioned, committed, and consistent.**

² Ibid.

You also know that discipleship is another name for followership – a term that reminds me of a modern hymn by John Bell, *The Summons*.

It's #726 in your hymnal.³ The hymn has five verses. The first four verses are written in the voice of Jesus with the final verse as an individual's response. And, interestingly for our purposes today, it was originally written to mark the end of a volunteer's time of service.

Listen as I read the first, fourth and fifth verses.

Will you come and follow me
If I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
And never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
Will you let my name be known,
Will you let my life be grown
In you and you in me?

Will you love the 'you' you hide
If I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside
And never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
To reshape the world around,
Through my sight and touch and sound
In you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true
When you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you
And never be the same.
In your company I'll go
Where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow
In you and you in me.

Siblings in Christ, the summons to difficult discipleship is clear and compelling. May we respond in faith. Amen.

³ Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, Louisville, KY, 2013.)