

Sermon for Zion, April 22, 2018

Hymns: 434 – For the beauty of the earth (1,2,4,5); “Follow Me”; 211- Take Up Your Cross (1,2,5); 634 - Will you come and follow me

Scripture: Matthew 10:1-8

Sermon Title: “To Be A Disciple” – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

*Matthew 10:1-8*

*Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.*

*These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.*

*These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.”*

Here’s something surprising: Jesus never used the word “Christian.” Probably because the word didn’t exist! It was invented in the city of Antioch, the ruins of which are right on the Turkey / Syria border, which makes it a not-very-nice-place-to-visit at the moment. But a couple thousand years ago, Antioch was one of the areas where the followers of Jesus had early-on made some real inroads among both Jewish and non-Jewish communities. As a Greco-Roman city, there were lots of different faiths represented in Antioch, with disciples and followers of various gods. So to distinguish the followers of Jesus from the followers of all these other faiths, they coined a nick-name: “Christian.” It took a while for it to catch on; “Christian” appears only three times in the New Testament: twice in the Book of Acts, and once in the letter called First Peter.

So, in fact, Jesus never called the people who followed him “Christians;” the word wouldn’t be invented for another 20 years. He called those who followed him “Disciples,” and he instructed them – instructed us! - to go throughout the world and make more disciples. Not more Christians; more disciples.

The reason I’m banging away on this is because we understand and use the words “Christian” and “Disciple” very differently. “Christian” can mean a simple cultural identification; someone who lives within a culture or country which regards itself as predominantly or historically Christian, as opposed to, say, Muslim, or Buddhist, or Shinto. A person might never attend church, never read the Bible, have

only the most rudimentary understanding of what Christmas and Easter are, but if you ask that person if they are a Christian, they'll say "yes," because they live in a historically or culturally Christian country. Yet if you ask that same person if they are a disciple of Jesus, they may well back off and say, "Well, I am sympathetic with the idea of Christianity, but I'm not involved in it, to that degree. I wouldn't call myself a disciple."

People instinctively know that discipleship implies a degree of identification, commitment and involvement beyond mere cultural adherence. And in that respect, I'm more than a little sorry that the nick-name "Christian" has almost entirely replaced the word "Disciple."

Because we are called to be disciples. Not onlookers; not spectators; not sympathizers: disciples. A disciple of Jesus not simply a cultural adherent; a disciple of Jesus is a committed follower, a worshiper, a willing servant, and a witness.

In the beginning days, to be a disciple of Jesus was to be a committed follower. "Follow me," was the message Jesus gave time and again. And many did. In fact, if you do a simple New Testament word search on "follow," you'll be amazed to see how often it is used – well over 100 times, appearing in all four Gospels, and almost every other New Testament book. Step one in discipleship was to quite literally follow Jesus; here's how his ministry begins (Matthew 4:18-22):

*As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him.*

*Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.*

Shortly thereafter, we read of Jesus ministering to large crowds. And the result (Matthew 4:25): *Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.*

But a disciple didn't just physically follow Jesus from place to place. A disciple quite literally "sat at the feet of Jesus," and listened to his teaching. Time and again, we hear this sort of phrase, as at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1): *"Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them."* To be a disciple is to sit at the feet of the Master, to listen to his words, and to learn.

A disciple follows, and a disciple learns. But a disciple also puts what they learn into practice. That's the difference between a disciple and a spectator. In telling the parable of the man who builds a house on a firm foundation rather than on shaky sand, Jesus says (Luke 6:47), *"As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like."* They are the ones, says Jesus, who withstand the many storms of life. He also said, *"Who are my mother and brothers? My mother and sisters and brothers – my true family - are those who hear God's word and put it into practice (Luke 8:21)."*

Following Jesus was a big decision, and a big commitment. It carried a cost. It involved leaving much of the old life, old habits and old values behind. Jesus was quite explicit about the cost of following Him (Luke 14:33): *"Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple..."* He also said, *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"* (Matthew 16:24-27).

Following requires commitment. Committing yourself to following Jesus, no matter the difficulties, is central to being a disciple.

Not all of Jesus' followers were able to make such a commitment, or, having made it, stick with it. We often think of Judas abandoning Jesus, but the Gospel of John tells us that there were many who left Jesus after finding the commitment too much to handle. At about the halfway point in Jesus' ministry, we read, *"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him"* (John 6:66). When Jesus asked Peter if he, too, were going to abandon him, Peter said, *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God. (John 6:68-69)"*

So a disciple is a committed follower, who learns from Jesus, sticks with him, and puts the words and example of Jesus into practice.

A disciple is more than just a committed follower, however. It is possible to learn the moral and ethical principles which Jesus taught, and seek to put those principles into action, without actually being a disciple. To be a disciple of Jesus also means to recognise who Jesus is – our crucified and risen Saviour and Lord – and to worship him as the very Son of God.

When the disciples came to understand just who Jesus really is; well, as the Gospel of Matthew tells us, at the conclusion of the Walking on Water story

(Matthew 14:33): “*Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’*” Later, when in the presence of the Resurrected Jesus, the first reaction of those who met him was to worship. We read this in Matthew (28:8-9): “*So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.*” And the disciples? “*Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him... (Matthew 28:16-17).*”

Jesus, you see, isn’t just a philosopher, isn’t just a teacher; Jesus is the Risen Son of God. Disciples of Jesus acknowledge who he is, and gather with fellow disciples in worship of their Risen Lord. The Book of Acts, which is the story of the Early Church, tells again and again how Christians gathered together to worship, learn, and support one another in the faith. Listen (Acts 2:42-47):

*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

That snapshot of life in the early church sums up what it meant to be a disciple!

A disciple of Jesus is a committed follower, a worshiper, and a willing servant. It was Jesus who said (Matthew 20:28), “*I did not come to be served, but to serve.*” He set the example for the disciples to follow, on the night of the Last Supper. After washing the disciples’ feet, a responsibility typically of the lowest of servants, he said (John 13:12-17): “*Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*

A disciple serves their master, and, says Jesus, disciples serve one another as well. In fact, “servant” is the most common term which Jesus uses when talking about his followers. Parable after parable, he puts his disciples in the role of servants. Like in the parable of the talents – the servant who used his talents well is commended

(Matthew 25:23): *“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!”*

Even more common are Jesus’ many parables surrounding the idea of the servants being busy when the master returns. To be a disciple means to be a servant, busy with the Master’s business. Our discipleship needs to be expressed in word and in action, if it is to be real. As we heard in our reading from earlier, when Jesus called his disciples, he gave them a job to do, summing it up this way: *“Freely you have received; freely give!”* Or to put it another way: *“How can we say we love God if we do not help our brother?”* writes Jesus’ friend John. *“Faith without works is dead,”* writes Jesus’ brother James, somewhat more bluntly. We express our discipleship, our love and our faith in Jesus, by our service to those within these walls, participating in the life and work of this congregation, of this community of faith, ensuring that the tasks which are needed to make this church work are getting done, that the sharing of our time, talents and resources are contributing to a healthy, vital congregation.

No less importantly, we express our love and our faith to the world outside these walls. We do that here through providing hot meals and food assistance for our local needy through our support of the Upper Room Soup Kitchen and Food Bank. We provide life-changing encounters of faith for our youth through our support of Camp Keir, a faith which is supported and grows in our dynamic and active Youth Group. We provide life-saving famine relief for the desperate refugees and victims of disaster through the FoodGrains Bank. And we do – you do - so much more.

Individually, we do all manner of things to bring the Gospel in all its life-saving reality to family, friends, neighbours, and those who never thought anyone would treat them with the kind of love we experience in Jesus. Our discipleship needs to be expressed in word and in action, if it is to be discipleship at all. Service is how we share our love and our faith, in response to God’s love for us. A disciple is a servant.

So where are we so far? A disciple of Jesus is a committed follower, a worshiper, a willing servant, and to be a disciple is to be a witness – to be a disciple is to tell others of what Jesus has done for us, what he means to us, and what he can mean to them. In short, a disciple makes more disciples.

Often times, we act more like disciples of the Druze faith than disciples of Jesus. Druze is a faith which arose in the Middle East about 1000 years ago, and is still largely based there. The Druze are forbidden to share their faith with others, or to

reveal the secrets of their belief. Ask a Druze what they believe, and all you'll get is a blank stare. In that regard, they'd make good Presbyterians!

Because for whatever reason, we Presbyterians are reluctant to speak about or share our faith. We've bought the line that a person should never discuss religion or politics, and while I'm in sympathy with the latter, the former is not in accordance with our faith. We are called to share our faith! An excellent example is the instruction which Jesus gave to a man he delivered from incredible oppression: "*Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you* (Mark 5:19)." That's what a disciple does.

If you're in any doubt, the final instructions which Jesus gave to his disciples should clear up any uncertainty. As Matthew records Jesus' words (Matthew 28:18-20): "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*"

Just before he ascended to heaven, Luke records Jesus' final instruction (Acts 1:8): "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you and give you power. Then you will be my witnesses, telling everyone about me in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and everywhere in the world.*" You will be my witnesses. You! Us! We are to share the Good News, to invite people into this wonderful relationship we enjoy – to be the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, disciples of the Risen Lord. And to be a disciple of Jesus is to be a committed follower, a worshiper, a willing servant, and a witness.

But there is one more thing – one more important thing. It is in many ways the most important thing of all. John remembers just how Jesus said it, and he preserved those words for us to hear – words from the very heart of Jesus, from his heart to yours: "*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another* (John 13:34)." Love is to be our defining characteristic. We must follow, worship, serve, and witness, with love. For it is by our love, says Jesus, that "*everyone will know that you are my disciples.*" Above all, we love.

Are we disciples, or observers? Do we follow Jesus, or simply watch the parade go by? Do we attend church, or do we attend worship? Are we content to let everyone else do the work, or are we willing servants? Do we keep our faith private, a secret, or do we share the faith with others in word or in deed? Do we love, as God has loved us? Are we cultural Christians, or are we truly Disciples of Jesus? May God help us to follow, and in following, find new life for ourselves and for others. Amen.