



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 6 (A)

Discipleship and Mission

[RCL] Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7); Psalm 116:1, 10-17; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8(9-23)

The Church is identified and known by many names and characteristics. It is seen as a community of saints, God's chosen people, the new Israel, and so on. All of these images do have a strong biblical basis and have been handed down in the Christian tradition across centuries. However, it is important to remember that the basic calling for the Church is to be disciples of Jesus Christ. The early church was clear that it was fundamentally called to a life of discipleship. In a sense, everything else came later. The Great Commission of Jesus was to "Go... and make disciples of all nations." It is, therefore, mandatory that the Church never loses sight of this core element of our faith. But how do we understand Christian discipleship?

In the Gospel lesson, we are able to identify some key aspects of Christian discipleship. As Jesus traveled around Palestine, he was moved by the need for hope and healing among those who thronged to him, those Matthew calls, "harassed" and "helpless." As Biblical scholars like Marcus Borg remind us, in Hebrew and Aramaic, the two languages familiar to Jesus, the word for compassion was rooted in the term for 'womb.' This means compassion for Jesus (and his Jewish contemporaries) was not felt in one's head but in one's gut. It is with this deepfelt concern that he called his disciples and sent them out to proclaim that God's reign was near, to heal, restore, cleanse, and liberate those to whom they were sent. He also reminded them that they would face and endure hatred, betrayal, opposition, and arrest, and yet endure all this with the help of God.

What does this mission paradigm offered by Jesus mean for us today? To begin with, we are able to see that discipleship is a calling, a life of grace. Just as Jesus chose his twelve disciples in the gospel passage, Christ has called us and we follow him. As the apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Roman Church, we are justified by faith which is only made possible through Jesus Christ, and it is in his grace we stand. In that sense, discipleship always begins with and is rooted in divine love. There is nothing about which we can boast. The Church can never be proud of itself or stand on its own integrity, credibility, or authority. It is only because God in Christ felt compassion (in God's "womb," according to the Gospels) toward us that we have been called out as the Church – indeed, the Greek word for Church - "ecclesia" – is composed of the words "*ek*," meaning "out," and "*kaleo*," meaning "called." We can say that discipleship is an outcome of God's mission, God reaching out to make us his own. As disciples, we only respond to his calling and

continue the work of Christ, always with his help. The words of Jesus to his first disciples, “Follow me,” continues to echo in and through the Church throughout history.

However, the call to be a disciple is never about the disciples themselves. Christian discipleship is always about engaging with and living for others. The chosen disciples are sent out to proclaim the Good News of the kingdom and share God’s healing and liberation with others. This is why the Church, as the community of disciples, is also sent out into the world. As former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple wisely noted, the Church always exists for its non-members, a truth that we often and sadly forget. Church, while it should certainly be a mutually comforting and loving fellowship of God’s children, cannot become self-centered or inward facing. The Church is a proclaiming community of disciples, in word and deed, to make a difference in the world. Discipleship and mission go hand in hand. Without mission, the Church loses its meaning and purpose of existence. But let us not forget the divine love and compassion that is at work in Christian mission. Disciples go out to make more disciples – not for the sake of increasing numbers in the pews – but because God’s compassion moves within us.

We may ask here: Is discipleship always a life of reaching out *to* others? Do we always have to keep proclaiming and sharing God’s gifts *with* others? Jesus gently reminds his disciples that they should also be willing to receive. They should be humble to receive help and support from others. Elsewhere, in Mark’s gospel, Jesus instructs his disciples to eat what is offered to them and stay where they are received. There is mutual care and compassion as disciples engage in mission. We can identify this, even if a bit indirectly, in the ancient story of Abram receiving the divine visitors into his home. While Abram generously and compassionately offered the three men food and drink, he also received, even if unexpectedly, blessings from them that would eventually change his life completely.

Connecting this with Christian discipleship, we may say that one cannot give without being open and humble to receive. Often Christian mission is imagined only in terms of giving or offering – but seldom as receiving. But, when we engage with others in mission, Christ encourages us to receive as well. Here, receiving may not be limited to food and other material resources but also spiritual resources. In other words, disciples are to be open to listening and learning from those to whom they are sent. Making disciples is not about patronizing. Rather, it is leading a life of humility, openness, receiving, and genuine dialogue.

Finally, our Lord also reminds the twelve that discipleship involves vulnerability. We can be proud of our calling as disciples, but we cannot forget that it is always a risk-taking business. Those who follow Jesus, because they strive for peace and justice, often find themselves in trouble with the powers of the world. Yet, we are never alone. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is with us and speaks through us. This is why, as we heard in the epistle lesson, Paul was able to boast in his sufferings. We see such difficult Christian witnessing in many parts of the world even today. Christians are persecuted for their faith in many countries, and mission and evangelism are life-threatening work. Of course, we may not face such circumstances in our society, but as local churches and as individuals, we do face and engage with our fellow sisters and brothers in our schools, workspaces, and neighborhood. And because of the diversity of

religious views around us, including those that are skeptical and suspicious of religion, particularly Christianity, we are often placed in a vulnerable position. How do we share the light of God in Jesus Christ with someone suffering in darkness and who feels their life is beyond hope? How do we share the love of Christ with someone who has been hurt by those who claim to be Christians? How do we speak with someone who has been experiencing systemic injustice in society, at times in the name of Christ?

In such circumstances, we could come up with our own strategies – but Jesus reminds us that we can always trust in God’s wisdom. No matter who we may face or what our circumstances might be, we know that the Holy Spirit works through us. After all, it is God who has called and sent us in the first place. May we, as the Church whose head is Christ Jesus, continue to be mindful that we have been called as his disciples by the grace of God. May we remember that we are sent, filled with compassion, to “go out and make disciples,” boldly proclaiming the Good News of God’s kingdom in a broken world. Amen.

*This sermon was written by **the Rev. Dr. Joshua Samuel.***